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The Spangled Sport Shadower;



THE SPORT DROVE THE HOODED ROAD-AGENTS ON IN FRONT OF HIM.

OR,
**LARIAT BILL'S SWING
At Santa Fe.**

A STORY OF
ROPING IN THE ROAD-AGENTS.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
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CHAPTER I.

SENTENCED TO DEATH.

LIGHTNING always strikes without warn-
ing.

The thought of personal peril was far
enough from the mind of Talbot Vennor, as
he made his way along the dim trail leading
to Santa Fe.

Nevertheless, peril of the most terrible kind was very near him—was hurrying to meet him.

The hoofs of his horse, sinking into the deep sand of the hills, made scarcely a sound. The stars, shining with a brilliancy unknown in more humid climates, glittered like diamonds on the bosom of the night. The low-growing cedars and pinones came slowly into view, and as slowly passed, as he rode on.

Talbott Vennor was in no hurry. He had much to think about—many thoughts requiring cool deliberation.

He was a stranger to the country, in a certain sense. Previous to this trip he had never seen New Mexico, though he was the owner of one of the famous turquoise mines of Bernalillo County.

He had reached the ancient city of Santa Fe only the week before, and from thence had journeyed to the Barrancas Mine, his property.

It was a valuable mine. The stones exhumed from its depths were of a superior character. Yet, for some reason, it had lately not paid for the working.

To ascertain this reason was what had brought him from his pleasant New York home to these wilds.

In setting out from Santa Fe it had been his intention to bring the resident agent up with a round turn—to have an accounting which should at least be explanatory, if not satisfactory.

He had never dreamed—how could he?—that there was no resident agent acknowledging his authority—that his claims would be scoffed at, his title and interest denied, and even his name and identity questioned.

And yet that was what had occurred.

A man calling himself Talbott Vennor had been found in control of the mine; and the real Talbott Vennor, dazed and indignant, could find no one willing to credit his statements or hearken to his story.

It was a startling situation. A gigantic wrong had been undertaken, perhaps had been consummated. Could the daring plans of this false Talbott Vennor be thwarted?

The real Talbott Vennor found himself at his wits' end as he rode slowly along through the night. All the documents showing his ownership were recorded in Bernalillo County. The courts would uphold his title of Talbott Vennor; but, there were now two Talbott Vennors! There might be more! The world is wide, there are millions of people in it, and the duplication of names is not uncommon! How could he show that he, the Talbott Vennor of New York, was the true owner of the Barrancas Mine?

No man in the territory knew him, while there were no doubt hundreds ready to bolster with their oaths the pretensions of the false claimant.

To recall the events surrounding his visit to the Barrancas Mine did not contribute to his ease of mind.

He had gone there without a thought of what awaited him; had had an interview with the false Talbott Vennor—an interview that was wrathful and stormy; and had been ejected from the mine office as if he were no more than an intruding vagabond or tramp.

His blood boiled at the recollection. He was resolved that the insult should be punished and the mine regained. He would drive into disgrace and prison the men who were conspiring against him.

Thus his thoughts ran, when there was a rustling amid the cedars and pinones that hedged the trail, and an armed man rode out into the starlight and threw himself across the trail with cocked rifle.

Vennor brought up his horse with a jerk and began to fumble in his hip pocket for the revolver he carried there; but, before he could fish it out, the glittering rifle barrel was pointed at his breast and a rough voice ordered him to throw up his hands.

The voice had a muffled sound, and Vennor now saw that the rifleman was heavily masked; but, before he could look further, or determine how he should

answer the insolent demand, other horsemen rode out of the gloom into the trail and surrounded him.

It was useless to attempt to combat this force. Vennor realized this; and, when the command was again given, he obediently pointed his fingers skyward.

The horsemen crowded threateningly about him, and one of them seized his bridle-rein. The faces of all were hidden behind hoods of cloth.

"What is your name?" demanded the leader of the masked riders.

Talbott Vennor started as if stung. Not because of the question, for that might have been expected; but the voice of the leader thrilled and shook him. It was the voice of the false Talbott Vennor!

Nevertheless he folded his arms on his breast and replied as calmly as he could:

"Talbott Vennor, of New York, the owner of the Barrancas Mine."

A mocking laugh ran around the hooded circle.

"That's good! Talbott Vennor, of New York! The owner of the Barrancas Mine! Better keep it up and say you're Governor of New Mexico!"

"I speak only that which is true! That which you know to be true! And I don't doubt that it is because I am the owner of that mine you stop me now."

Again that mocking and heartless laugh.

"The owner of the Barrancas Mine, yet a horse lifter? I suppose you know what we do with horse thieves?"

Yes, Talbott Vennor knew only too well the fate that was meted out to a horse thief, or even to one accused of being a horse lifter, which so far as the punishment went, usually amounted to the same thing.

"You took that horse from the stable of Jose Comilla, near Ojo Caliente. We know the horse, and have ridden all that distance to get it back and to punish you! So climb out of that saddle before you are pulled out of it with a riata."

Vennor grew more than ever alarmed.

"Gentlemen, you are mistaken!" he said. "I hired this horse at the Toledo Stables, in Santa Fe, and have been with him out toward Bernalillo."

But he had hardly uttered the words when, like a circling serpent, a riata swept through the air, settled about his neck and shoulders, and Vennor was plucked from his seat and dragged heavily to the sand.

Before he could rise, or recover from the shock, he was bound and his revolver taken from him.

"What is the fate of the horse thief?" demanded the hooded leader of his hitherto silent followers, as he stood Vennor on his feet.

"Death!" was the ominous reply.

"Aye, death! No horse thief in the territory! That is our motto!"

"Number Two!"

At the summons, a burly ruffian spurred his pony to the front, touched his hood—the upper portion of it—and then sat silently, awaiting orders.

"Into the Valley of Death with him. Let the coyotes devour his flesh and polish their teeth on his bones."

"Si, senor!" was the answer, and, though the words were Spanish, the tones were so American, and the voice so peculiar, that Vennor felt sure he could recognize the voice anywhere.

"What is the fate of the horse thief?" the leader again demanded, dramatically, addressing, as before, the entire band.

And again came that terrible and fear-provoking reply:

"Death!"

"Number Two, you know your duty! Do it!"

Once more there was a touching of the hand to the hood, in half-military fashion, and Number Two slid out of the saddle, drew a revolver, and motioned to the prisoner to walk on in advance of him.

There was something so terror-inspiring in the very coolness and deliberation with which all this was said and done, that Vennor could hardly repress a cry of horror.

"I will not go with you!" he cried, struggling vainly to free his wrists of the cords that held them.

A hoarse laugh greeted this.

"Oh, yes, you will!" said Number Two, pushing him forward with the muzzle of a revolver. "I reckon you don't want me to make this little pup bite you right here?"

From that touch of the cold steel Vennor shrank as from death itself, and moved forward.

Number Two, chuckling audibly, thrust the muzzle of the weapon against the flesh of the prisoner's neck and laughed.

"He's a-going to be sensible, captain!" he called out to the chief. "He'll go with me, you bet!"

CHAPTER II.

FACING HIS FATE.

Number Two did not leave his pony behind him. He led it by the bridle-rein, as he urged his prisoner on into the gloom of the cedars and away from the trail.

And poor Vennor; his mind had room for but one thought. He was being driven out into the wilderness to be shot like a dog. Was that to be his fate?

A sudden suggestion, coupled with a great hope, came to him at the mental question.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"You heard the order I got. Into the Valley of Death."

"Where is that?"

"Just out there under the shadder of that mountain."

"And why am I being taken there? You know I am not a horse thief! Why was I not hanged as a horse thief?"

"You're going there because the captain—and the band—want to get you out of the way!" Number Two confessed, evidently not thinking further deception necessary. "You oughtn't to need any more words than that, if you ain't a fool!"

"I'm not a fool!" returned Vennor. "I think I understand you. I am to be killed because I have come between a certain man and the Barrancas Mine."

There was no response.

"Of course it is worth a good deal to him to get me out of the way; and I presume it's also worth something to you? No doubt you share with him in the profits of the mine? They ought to be big, if the mine is properly worked?"

Still Number Two maintained silence.

"If I will pay you more for my liberty than you can get out of the Barrancas Mine, you will let me go, will you not?"

He was risking all on this throw. Would it fail? He awaited the answer with beating heart.

"You're a fool, after all!" said Number Two, with blunt directness. "I suppose you've got a pocketful of money which you're going to pay into my fist for letting you cut out of this? I calculate if you've got it, I'll git it, anyway."

"No, no!" protested Vennor. "I meant nothing of the kind. I have no money—at least a very little. But I can pay you. I am rich. My check is good for thousands, back in New York. What is it worth to you to take these cords off and let me go? Come! Every man has his price, they say, and this is just a matter of business. Kill me and you get nothing. Release me and you get much!"

The ruffian was silent for a moment, as if debating the question within himself.

"It wouldn't be safe," he averred. "I wouldn't dare. I'd be followed, no matter where I went, and be killed, if it took years to do it. No, I wouldn't dare!"

"Put it at ten thousand dollars," Vennor persisted. "Five for the act and five more for the risk you run."

A drop of rain splashed his face and caused him to see dark gathering clouds and the angry look of the sky.

Number Two made some reply, but, to the surprise of both men, a sudden peal of thunder drowned it.

"Put it at ten thousand; I will see

that that sum is placed right in your hands when my safety is assured."

"I say you're a fool! Walk on there! Don't you see the lightning and the rain? The chances are big that we'll get a cloudburst. I want to get through this business."

The language of Number Two was a strange admixture of good and bad grammar—of changeable dialect—of Western accent and Eastern pronunciation.

As if to emphasize his statements, a gust of rain and wind almost swept them from their feet.

A single coyote howled dismally; then other coyotes answered all around.

"Did you catch that?" cried the ruffian. "The critters scent you. They know you're comin' and they're preparin' for the feast. They're thick in the Valley of the Shadow, into which we're walking, and you'll make their acquaintance!"

They had walked rapidly, and the tumbled stones, the rough pathway, and the rapidity of the descent, told that they were descending.

Vennor shuddered as he realized that the ghastly Valley of Death lay just below.

The storm was almost on them. The wind had increased. Soon it would be a gale. The very elements seemed furious at the dastardly crime contemplated.

A glare of lightning as they descended the steep showed a narrow sandy arroya in front, girt in by rocks until it resembled a dry canyon.

The desperate fear of the prisoner now was dominated by a desperate purpose—to break away from the executioner, even if killed in the attempt.

He stopped, as if his feet cramped, and stooped forward.

The cord was at once tightened and the muzzle of the revolver was pushed against his head.

"No monkeyin'!" growled Number Two.

But, regardless of the revolver, Vennor threw himself backward, and strove to beat the ruffian down with his bound hands.

The revolver was discharged, the ball creasing and burning Vennor's neck; but it had no further effect; and, before Number Two could recover from his surprise or regain the cord that had fallen from his grasp, Vennor was bounding away down the slope like a mountain goat.

He reached the arroya and passed it, and was about to dive into the shadows beyond, when a pistol shot sounded on the night air and Talbott Vennor, stricken, as it seemed, mortally, staggered and fell to the sand.

CHAPTER III.

IN A PUEBLO ESTUFA.

The report of the pistol was almost instantly answered by such a crash of thunder as fairly made the earth tremble; then came a deluge of water, which swept across the hills with terrific speed and force. A moment more and the storm had passed to the hills beyond, and Number Two immediately leaped across the intervening space and stood at the side of the fallen man.

Blood was oozing from some point in the chest and staining the shirt and clothing.

"I reckon he's done for!" was the comment, grunted in a pleased way. "I thought sure he was going to make the break. That was a nallin' good wing shot I made. It would have fetched a grouse, I'm thinkin'! Well, 'tain't the way the captain ordered it; but it's done, an' I don't know but one way is as good as another!"

He stooped and made another hasty examination, getting his fingers stained with blood, and was about to feel for the pulse when he was stayed by an ominous roar.

He sprang erect in a listening attitude. He had heard that deep monotone on more than one long-to-be-remembered occasion.

"A cloudburst!" he gasped.

He knew that, higher up in the hills, the storm, which had merely brushed him with its outer rain, had been of huge proportions—that tons upon tons, in an inconceivably short space of time, had poured down up there. That flood it was which was now coming down the bed of the arroya with an appalling boom and roar.

"Reckon I'd better dig out of this!" was his comment. "Don't know as I keer to get ketch'd again, as I was that time on the San Juan. 'Tain't no fun to be whirled round and tossed in such a torrent that no man can stand against."

The thunder crashed again, causing him to cower; then he fled back across the arroya and up the slope toward the point where he had left his pony.

The ominous roar of the oncoming flood spurred him on; and the thrust of the lightning and the crash of the thunder, now near and now far, served to hurry his steps.

But long before he gained the point on the slope on which he expected to find his pony, the flood had hurled itself across the spot where he had lately stood, and where the victim of his murderous pistol lay.

Vennor, unconscious and bleeding, was caught up by the flood and whisked away.

But a strange fate came to the stricken man, for, instead of crushing him against the rocks, the flood literally lifted the lifeless body to the top of a sandy knoll, and, dropping it there, passed on down the arroya.

The dash of the water was like a reviving stimulant. It shocked Talbott Vennor back to consciousness and life.

But though he came back to a half-knowledge of what had happened, he was, for a time, too weak to rise or move; so he lay there on the knoll, listening to the roar and jar of the flood as it sped on down the arroya, and almost incapable of well-connected thought.

This passed from him by degrees. He grew stronger, mentally and physically. He began to recall with clearness the events of the past few hours; they ceased to seem parts of a dream and became the memories of frightful actualities.

He then examined the wound in his side. It was still bleeding, but he thrilled with hope when he discovered that it really had but cut the outer flesh and had not penetrated ribs or lungs.

Number Two would have sworn that the bullet had entered Talbott Vennor's body, but it had only ploughed through Vennor's coat, between his body and his right arm.

After a time he felt strong enough to rise to a sitting posture; and this he did, staring cautiously around into the semi-gloom to ascertain if Number Two was still in the vicinity.

He saw the evidences of the flood all about him—mud, sand and drift.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, struggling to his knees. "I am alone!"

His hands were still bound and the cord was still around his neck.

A ragged boulder was near at hand. He crawled to it and proceeded to saw the wrist cords against its sharp edges. The skin was torn, but the strands yielded finally and fell away. Then he lifted the riata from his neck and a thrill went through him like the effect of strong wine.

"Thank God!" he cried again. "I am free! I am free! I have escaped the horrible plot for my murder! I still live, and those who sought my life will be made aware of the fact."

Still uncertain but that the hooded fiend, whom he feared, was near, he at length slowly made his way across the knoll, and, without recrossing the arroya, turned his steps toward Santa Fe, guided by the now clear, beaming lanterns of Heaven.

He knew the journey would be a long one afoot, and that he was very weak; but he hoped to accomplish it.

Hour after hour passed. He did not know how many miles he had covered.

Really, he had not traversed five, in a straight line.

Then he shouted and waved his hands, for before him there gleamed a light—two, three, four, a half-dozen.

He broke into a run that carried him on at a goodly gait, but the lights disappeared, as if suddenly extinguished.

He stopped, and there came to his ears queer sounds, the like of which he had never before heard. At first he thought them the yelps of coyotes; but, when they came again, louder and clearer, he was ready to say they were human voices.

"That is strange!" he muttered. "Am I in my right mind?"

He passed a hand across his face to reassure himself. Then he stumbled forward, uncertain as to what he was to discover or confront.

Almost before he was aware of it, he bumped against the dark wall of a mud house.

He had seen Mexican houses of mud, which much resembled this, and was about to pass around it, when that singular yelping, singing sound was repeated.

It sounded far away, yet he felt sure it came from no great distance. And, as he looked about, he became convinced that there were other dark mud walls and almost invisible houses near.

"Must be a village of Mexican huts!" he thought.

He groped his way around the wall, but, finding no one in the adobe, he pushed on in the direction of the noises.

Passing yet another house, and all the while getting nearer the singers, a wild outburst greeted him:

"Eo-yah yah yah! Ehiyah, e-hi-yah, yah yah! O-ho! O-ho! Eo-yah yah yah! Ehiyah! Hi-e-o! Hi-e-o! Hi-e-o!"

Something like the above, oddly emphasized and chanted, is what he heard.

He glanced around, more inquiringly.

He saw other mud houses, now that his eyes were accustomed to the light in which they rested. They stretched away into the dimness of the farther glooms. But they were houses, human habitations, if only of mud, or mud bricks.

When he approached them he found them, however, quite empty. His calls and his raps went unanswered, except at one, where a woman—he thought the creature so strangely bundled must be a woman—ordered him away.

Moving on, he knew from the sounds that reached him that the next house was occupied by the singers.

It was a circular structure, without any door, but with a ladder leading to a low mud roof.

Up this ladder he climbed, and then groped along on the roof to a spot where he saw a light.

There was a round hole in the roof, and from it a light streamed upward.

The singing was plainer now, and the thump of the drums more accentuated.

A superstitious fear grew in the heart of Talbott Vennor, and he was on the point of backing from the spot and retracing his way out of the village, but curiosity drew him on.

As he drew nearer the hole in the middle of the roof his foot turned on a small pole lying there, and he shot forward and downward into the room below!

That he was astonished and bewildered beyond measure may be believed, but not more so than were the half-naked men into whose midst he fell.

He had unwittingly dropped into an estufa, or sacred council house of the Pueblos!

A score or more of men, hideously painted and daubed, and almost minus clothing, had been yelping out the incantation song and pounding the weird accompaniment on keg-shaped drums.

They were not savages, like the Apaches or Comanches. They were Pueblos, and the Pueblos are popularly supposed to be good Catholics and good Christians.

Notwithstanding this, it is a known fact that they mingle with their Christianity innumerable beliefs and practices handed down from the days of the Aztecs, and that they still believe in the return of Montezuma, and in many places keep the sacred fire burning without intermission, day and night.

Vennor was not wise in all these things; he knew very little about the Pueblos; all Indians were to him very much alike; and, when he found himself in this group of seeming savages, he gave himself up for lost.

A furious babble succeeded the song, and the Indians crowded about him. Some with uplifted hands and drawn weapons, as if to strike him down, and others apparently more moved by questioning and curiosity.

Talbott Vennor had never been in greater peril—not even when driven into the wilderness by Number Two to be shot, for there is nothing more religiously guarded by the Pueblos than the estufa, or sacred council house. The Christian priests may enter everywhere but there. No white dare put his face inside its walls, or look on its interior and live to tell of the things there revealed.

The sturdy Easterner did not know this, and he glanced inquisitively at the walls, draped with skins, at the rude bunks in the corners, at the feather-ornamented banners and the fetiches covered with beads and quills.

And by so looking he was sealing his fate!

An angry outcry arose about him, and, before he knew he was to be assaulted, he was thrown down and bound with thongs that drew tighter and that were more cutting than the cords applied by the hooded knights of the road.

"What have I done?" he questioned, wondering if they would understand him. "I was on my way to Santa Fe, and was lost when I approached your village!"

A stalwart fellow, painted green and black, with ugly yellow circles on his cheeks, and almost no clothing on his body, stepped from the midst of his associates.

"You have seen things that the white man must not see! You have looked in the sacred estufa of the Pueblos! The white man that does that dies!"

The words were English and the pronunciation good.

A swift understanding of the situation swept through the mind of the imperiled man.

"I thank you for saying that," he exclaimed, fervently. "I did not know where I was! I do not know the things I now see—I do not understand them—they are to me as things never before beheld. If you will let me go, I promise you, on the honor of a white man, that I will never speak of them to a living creature!"

His evident honesty made a good impression on the Pueblos. They had met many white men. Every week, almost, they were in Santa Fe, making purchases in the stores and mingling with whites and Mexicans. They saw that this stranger had not come into their midst with any evil intent, and there arose friends who began to talk in his behalf and urge that this mistake of his was not worthy of death.

Nevertheless, the older Pueblos, and those most thoroughly imbued with old Pueblo ideas, clamored for the strict carrying out of the letter of the Pueblo law.

The intruder was thrust out from their midst, up the ladder, and across the roof into another mud hut, the door of which was closed, and he was left alone with his unpleasant cogitations.

The thongs still held him, and he could hear the words and exclamations of the Indians as they debated his fate.

An hour passed. The tide of debate rose and fell. Angry words were passed, as he could frequently tell, and more than once he fancied the Pueblos were fighting among themselves.

Then the door of the mud hut opened, and an Indian approached, bearing an oil torch.

"I am Juan Tinto!" said this Indian, stopping in front of the prostrate white man and looking down into his face. "I have come to tell you what has been done. I am the Governor of the Pueblo."

Though the paint had been washed from the face and body of the Pueblo Governor, Juan Tinto, Vennor recognized

him by his voice as the one who had spoken to him in the estufa.

"I hope it is good!" said the prisoner, trying to be cheerful.

"It is good and it is bad!" was the quiet response. "You are to live, but it is as a prisoner of the Pueblos. What you have done cannot be passed by. You might tell of what you have seen. Therefore, you are to go no more among your own people."

Although almost anything was better than instant death, Talbott Vennor could not feel grateful for this respite. A life-long imprisonment in that place seemed too horrible for contemplation.

"You will not be kept always in a house," Juan Tinto went on, in explanation. "You can walk around the fields and pastures where the goats and the children play, but you will always be watched, so that you cannot get away."

Something like hope came into the heart of Vennor. If he was to be given such privileges he would not despair. The opportunity might come for escape. If it did not come, he would make it. He would get away, sooner or later, if not confined wholly to a house.

"It is better than death," he said, not deeming it wisdom to offer any protest. "Do I have to wear these bonds?"

He put up his hands, inquiringly, and the Pueblo Governor, drawing a knife, cut the thongs and freed the constrained wrists.

"I will get away!" was Vennor's thought. "I must get away."

And thus he began to feed his hope.

But, he was destined to learn that the Pueblo eye is keen and watchful, Pueblo vigilance unrelaxing, and Pueblo determination as unrelenting as the sea.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SPANGLED SPORT.

Glasses clinked above the bar; the calls of the dealers of various American and Mexican games resounded through the rooms; there was much loud talking and tramping, and from a distant corner came the strains of a number of fiddles.

The scene is in a noted gaming room of old Santa Fe.

There are, or were, many such rooms, for the Mexicans are inveterate gamblers. They patronize the various devices of the gambling fraternity with more liberality than the people of almost any other race, save the Indian.

And there were Indians in this Santa Fe resort. A number of Pueblos stalked solemnly about, clad in their blankets, and with their braided hair tied up with bright yarn and hanging down on their shoulders.

Likewise there were a few other red men from the not-distant reservations, and one old Apache from San Carlos, who could hold more firewater than any one else, and would willingly and joyfully gamble away his last feather if opportunity served.

Above the tumult, above the music and the clink of glasses sounded the words:

"I'm the Ring-tailed Roarer from the Raton Hills! I'm the Cattymount from the Mimbres Range, an' I kin lick any man what dares to step on my tail! Whoop!"

The ring-tailed roarer and catamount, who thus announced to the world that there was a chip on his shoulder which he wanted some one to knock off, was a cowboy-looking specimen of humanity, who had manifestly been "h'isting" too much "pizen."

He was tall and gaunt, sported high-heeled boots, with very red and gaudy tops; was belted about with knife and revolvers, wore fringed chaperejos, or leather leggings, of a most pronounced sort, and had, knotted at his waist, ready for instant use, a forty-foot riata.

Almost any one would have set him down as a "bad" man, and have kept away from him; and, indeed, when he gave vent to that war-whoop, there were many in the room who edged nearer the doors and seemed desirous of keeping well out of his path.

But several of those standing at or

near the bar did not budge or give the boaster a second glance.

He swept his eyes along these, and seemed to swell with anger.

With a few strides he was beside the bar, and there brought down his wide-brimmed and heavy sombrero with stinging force on the head of a young sport, who had, all the evening, been the essence of quietness and suavity.

This young sport was a handsome fellow, and was dressed in an extremely dashing costume—so dashing that he had gained the sobriquet of the Spangled Sport.

His garb was pronouncedly Mexican, and, although his complexion was entirely too fair, there was much in his general appearance to make the observer think him to be at least of Spanish descent.

The assault of the roarer and catamount had been by him wholly unexpected; but, instantly he swept the sombrero away and dropped a hand to his hip.

"Ready fer a fight, air ye?" yelled the Roarer, almost too much amazed to speak. "Ye don't know me, I reckon!"

"I know you're a bully and a blow-hard!" was the quiet retort.

Not a shade of anger passed across the face of the young man.

Indeed, the proverbial calm made the title he had given himself, "Halcyon Hal," seem deserved.

The Roarer hesitated and drew back, staring with undisguised astonishment in Halcyon Hal's face.

"You'll gimme yer handle, young feller, I reckon? I wants to know the name of the man what I'm about to kill. Not yer nommy dee plume, ye understand, fer I know you're called Halcyon Hal, but your genooine name!"

"I don't choose to give it," was the imperturbable answer. "I'm Halcyon Hal; and, if that don't suit you, anything you like. It don't make any difference what you call me. No law compels a man to roam around under his own name, that I'm aware of."

"Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me what yours is, though; for I'd just as soon know whom I'm to be killed by as not!"

The Roarer opened his mouth in mute astonishment. His hat had dropped to the floor, and he did not try to pick it up.

"Me? Well, I thought everybody knowed me! I'm Lariat Bill Larkins, at yer service! D'y'ever hear of me afore?"

"Never had the honor, indeed!" and the sport twirled his mustache with utter sang-froid.

By this time a crowd of the habitués of the gaming rooms had gathered about the two men, anxious to witness the termination of this singular encounter. Many of them were willing to bet that Lariat Bill Larkins would "take water," as they expressed it.

But Lariat Bill Larkins was no coward, whatever else might be thought of him. He was courageous enough on every occasion.

Usually he was not a bully, but when under the influence of liquor he was hardly responsible for what he did or said.

Halcyon Hal appeared to realize this as he looked into the red face before him.

"I don't want any trouble with you!" he ventured to say, and was aware that, in saying it, he had made a mistake, almost before the words were fairly out of his mouth.

"You don't, hey?" yelled the Roarer, leaping into the air and cracking his heels together twice before he touched the floor. "Goin' to flunk, air ye?"

So sure was he that the young sport wanted to back out of an encounter that he sprang forward and lightly touched him on the cheek.

Halcyon Hal's face flamed, though it was the only indication that he had momentarily lost control of his temper; and, almost before Larkins knew there was likely to be a retaliating blow, the white right fist of the young fellow shot out and Lariat Bill went down in a stunned heap.

That white fist, which was as hard as iron, in spite of its soft looks, had caught him in the throat with a blow that was irresistible.

"Knocked out in the first round," observed a gambler, coolly drawing his watch and beginning to count off the seconds. "That was a regular crusher. Five, six, seven seconds!"

The words seemed to bring Larkins back to the land of consciousness. He sat up, stared about him, scrambled to his feet, gave a bellow like that of a mad bull, and made another dive for the Spangled Sport.

But he only went down as before, and he did not come to time at the end of seven seconds, or ten seconds.

Hal grew uneasy, thinking he might have hit a harder blow than was intended, but at length Larkins came back to sensibility, and, being helped to his feet, walked unsteadily up to the bar and called for a drink.

Before gulping down the liquor which the barkeeper poured out for him, he stopped, holding it up in his trembling fingers, and, sweeping his eyes over the crowd, he said:

"Gents, it's my treat! The young chap yonder is a better man than I took him to be. He downed me, fair and square, as I'm ready to acknowledge; and I'm ekally ready to lick any galoot that says he didn't. I begs his pardon fer takin' him fer a dandy 'stid of a man. And now I asks you to step up and nominate yer p'izen!"

There was a general chorus of assent and pleasure at this termination of what might readily have been a fatal affair. The sports and hangers-on clustered about the bar and drank with much gusto and amid much talking.

"It really ought to be my treat," declared the sport. "It's worth a good deal to gain the friendship of a man like Lariat Bill Larkins. I want to be his friend, and want him to be mine."

"Put it there!" exclaimed the Roarer, extending his hard and bony hand.

And again there was a tipping of glasses and pleased comments.

The Spangled Sport was not unaware that there was an observer who had remained almost unnoticed throughout all this time—a woman who stood at the bottom of the stairway which led to the rooms above.

She had heard something of what was occurring, and had come down through curiosity.

A close student of human faces could not have failed to notice that she was much impressed by Halcyon Hal's appearance and manners.

And Halcyon Hal, designing fellow that he was, directed many of his remarks to this young woman, although he did not speak to her or exhibit any knowledge of the fact that she was near.

This young woman was Miss Ina Brandon, and it may be stated here that she was a niece of Bob Brandon, who was the Number Two selected by the hooded road-agent leader to run into the wilderness and slay Talbott Vennor.

Bob Brandon lived above the gaming house, occupying comfortable rooms with his daughter, Miss Bessie Brandon, and with their guest, Miss Ina Brandon. And they had, as a boarder, the owner of the gaming room—a man calling himself Talbott Vennor, who was the false Talbott Vennor already brought to the reader's attention.

Miss Ina Brandon, who stood at the foot of the stairs, and glanced admiringly at Halcyon Hal, was a dark-faced and dark-eyed beauty—her beauty being of the Spanish rather than of the American type.

"He is a handsome man," she thought, with kindling gaze. "A very handsome man. I must try to make his acquaintance!"

CHAPTER V.

"FRIENDS AND PARDNERS."

"Are we to be friends and pards?" questioned the Spangled Sport, tapping Larkins on the shoulder to draw his attention.

The crowd in the gaming room was dispersing, for the hour was now late, and

Halcyon Hal had seemed to re-encounter the Roarer by chance.

There was something in the tone and in the way the words were accented that caused Lariat Bill to turn squarely round and stare the questioner in the face.

Halcyon Hal gave a low and amused laugh.

"We declared and swore and reiterated that we were, you know, to the crowd around us a while ago; but such assertions are often more for effect than anything else. So I put the question: Are we to be friends and pards?"

Larkins smothered an exclamation in his big beard; then put out his hard and muscular hand, and exclaimed, with singular fervor:

"You bet! Put 'er there! The older I git, the more I find myself actin' the dog-goned fool!"

Then he glanced anxiously about as if fearing he might have been overheard; but, seeing no one near, he linked an arm into Halcyon Hal's and walked along at his side.

When they were clear of the gaming resort, and out of the narrow streets bounded by the blank walls of 'dobe houses, he whispered:

"Young feller, you played it fine! That is, if you're the gent I'm thinkin', which I can't hardly git it through my noggin' yit that you air!"

"Don't speak any names," warned the sport. "The walls may hear. I'll make known who I am if you'll come to my room. I think we can talk there in safety. Here some one may be following us, and listening!"

It seemed very improbable, but perhaps there was need for extreme caution; at any rate, Lariat Bill appeared to think the warning not out of place, and became as silent as an oyster throughout the remainder of the short walk.

Halcyon Hal's room was not far distant. It was in one of the old Mexican "doby" houses, that squat close to the ground like brooding hens.

The old house was dark, and, to all appearances deserted, as they made their way in through a side entrance, and sought the room of the sport, which was at the farther end of the rather big building.

The sport let himself in with a key, and then lighted a lamp.

"I've got something important to say to you, Larkins!" he whispered as he lit the lamp. "Something no one else must hear. I don't think we were followed, but it may be a good idea for you to slip back along the passage and listen a little while."

Lariat Bill nodded, and slipped away without a word.

He posted himself in the placita, in the shadow of one of the inner walls, and watched with the alertness and silence of a hawk for full five minutes, during which time not a thing stirred.

Convinced, finally, that there was nothing to fear, he went as softly back to the sport's room.

"It's all right!" he said, in answer to the questioning look. "Hain't even a cricket stirrin' out there."

"Very well, then," and Halcyon Hal locked the door.

"Now, who do you think I am?"

He stepped in front of the cowboy and straightened up to his full height.

A puzzled look came into the face of Lariat Bill. He had been very confident a moment before, but now there was such an alteration in the sport's tone and manner that he was again confused and puzzled.

"Hanged if I don't want to give it up," he acknowledged. "I thought I knowed, but I don't. I was agoin' to say that you air—"

"Out with it!"

"I'm afeard to. Mebbe I'm off in the guess. 'Twouldn't be right to him to speak his name less'n I was dead sure of the man that it was spoke to!"

"You'll do, Larkins!"

The laugh that followed was pleasant and musical. "I see I can tie to you. Now, do you know me?"

He swept aside hat, wig and mustache. "Put 'er there!" roared Larkins, wild

with delight. "Put 'er there! The Roarer would 'a' flunked if he'd a knowed who he was buttin' ag'in' in the gamin' room."

The young sport was even handsomer with the beard and mustache absent.

Something of the Mexican look had gone—in fact, nothing remained of it but the dress.

"Harry Vennor, put 'er there!"

"Harry Vennor no more, for a time at least!" the sport corrected. "From this on, my right name, when it must be given"—and a smile brightened his features—"is Harry Vane. Harry Vennor has departed—this life!"

"Put 'er there, then, Harry Vane!" cried Larkins, but in a lower voice. "I'm yours, to command. Yours, till the end of the war!"

"Thank you," replied the sport, helping himself to a chair and pushing another to Larkins. "Now tell me how you've been amusing yourself since I saw you last?"

He took up his mustache and wig and replaced them with much care.

"It do beat all," declared the cowboy, stopping in the midst of a running fire of narrative to admire the skillful disguise. "Yer granny wouldn't know you. Yer own dad 'ud pass ye by jist like he would a Chinyman!"

"You haven't heard anything about him? No more than we knew?"

"Not a thing! Don't seem like I can git hold of any new facts to trail up. Everything goes into the ground, jist like a rabbit track!"

The cowboy flushed and fidgeted, for he saw how unfortunately suggestive was the comparison.

"Yes, everything goes into the ground, where no doubt he is! But I'm going to keep at the thing, just the same; and, if we can't do any more, we can, perhaps, bring these rascals to justice and wrest the mine from them."

All of which needs some explanation, which we may be able to give in a few words:

The reader recalls how Talbott Vennor fell into the hands of the Pueblos after his escape from the pistol of Bob Brandon, or Number Two.

When several months had passed by, without bringing word from him, or reply to any letters of inquiry, the son of the real Talbott Vennor, Harry Vennor, appeared on the scene in New Mexico.

He visited the Barrancas Mine, even as his father had done, and revealed himself to the false Talbott Vennor.

Of course his death was instantly decreed, and the hooded band was called on to put him out of the way and permit the wolves of the Valley of Death to feed on his remains.

But, as it chanced, he had been instrumental, almost on the day of his arrival in the territory, in saving the life of a well-known cowboy.

This cowboy was Lariat Bill Larkins, the Roarer.

Larkins had been caught by a loop in a rope with which he was trying to subjugate a wild broncho, and was being dragged over the rocks and through the sage brush north of the town, when the youth, Harry Vennor, had opportunely put in an appearance and had rescued Larkins by skillfully shooting the broncho through the head.

Never was a man more grateful for a favor, and a compact of friendship had been there declared.

As it chanced, Larkins was in the gaming room in Santa Fe run by the false Talbott Vennor, and overheard talk indicating that young Harry Vennor was to be waylaid and slain at a certain point on the trail running between Santa Fe and the Barrancas Mine.

Satisfied that what he heard was the real intention of the speakers, he slipped away, mounted a fast horse and hurried toward the Barrancas Mine, and succeeded in warning the young man of the plot against his life: so the young man had returned to Santa Fe by another route, and thus escaped the death planned for him.

From that time the two had been close

friends, though they had never appeared together as comrades and pards in Santa Fe, nor anywhere else, so fearful were they that they would attract undesirable attention.

Then, for a time, the young man disappeared, but, as we have seen, materialized in disguise as Halcyon Hal, the Spangled Sport.

"If you didn't see through my disguise, it's not likely they did, or will," commented the sport, twisting at the ends of his false mustache. "I think you can see as far through a wall as any of those fellows."

Larkins was naturally pleased by the compliment, which was so well deserved.

"You may bet they didn't nobody drop to that thing, ner they won't. It takes the cake! An' it's as simple, too, as anything kin be."

"Say, no more about it, then," commanded Vane. "Let us move along as if there was nothing of the kind. I'm Harry Vane, the Spangled Sport. I've never been anything but Harry Vane! You understand?"

"Kerrect! Hal, I'm glad to make yer acquaintance, though I can't say as I was putticklerly glad to make the acquaintance of yer fist in the way I did. But, by-gones is, as you say, by-gones. We looks only to the future, as I wonst heerd a stump speaker say when he got rotten egged. I'm proud of you, me pard!"

The sport suddenly turned the key in the lock and looked out toward the placita. He had heard nothing, but was resolved not to be caught napping. An eavesdropper might learn things that would do him untold harm.

But no one had been lurking near, and the door was closed with a sigh of relief.

"You understand what I'm up to?" he remarked, glancing at the cowboy. "As a sport I can hang about the gaming room as much as I please without attracting suspicion. It's the natural resort of a sport, you see! And it will give me just the chance I want for shadowing Talbott Vennor and Bob Brandon!"

A queer feeling, that was half sorrow and half hate, always swept through the heart of Halcyon Hal when he spoke or thought of the proprietor of the gaming rooms as Talbott Vennor.

The proprietor of the gaming rooms, who was also the reputed proprietor of the Barrancas Mine, was known by no other name. Seemingly not a man in Santa Fe doubted that he was other than what he claimed. He had come there as Talbott Vennor, and was known to every one as Talbott Vennor.

"Kerrect ag'in," asserted the cowboy. "It's the very lay. Ye couldn't have struck out better. An' don't you fergit that I'm with ye! You can allus dee-pend on me, an' on my rope."

CHAPTER VI.

TWO FAIR WOMEN.

The fact that Ina Brandon, the dark-eyed and dark-haired beauty, had observed him with admiring attention was never long out of the thoughts of the Spangled Sport.

He was but a young man, and all young men are more or less affected by the admiration of a pretty woman.

Hal was at that susceptible age when every handsome young woman seems little less than an angel; and it is not to his discredit to say that he dreamed of the dark face of Ina that night and gave her more thought on the return of day than he did almost any one else.

When he had breakfasted he roamed around the streets in an unquiet way, and finally made up his mind to visit the gaming rooms again.

He hoped he might there meet the young woman who was so troubling his thoughts and perhaps find an opportunity of forming her acquaintance.

Nor was he inattentive to the crafty suggestion that, in forming the acquaintance of this young woman, he would be brought nearer to Bob Brandon and to

Talbott Vennor, whom he so desired to shadow.

Outwardly the gaming and drinking establishment that had been set up by the pretender on one of old Santa Fe's main streets was not an imposing affair. It was of "doby," as were most of the buildings in the queer old rookery of a town, though its front had been elevated, to give it a better appearance, and a gilt sign had been added.

The sport looked up at this sign before crossing the threshold.

It read simply "The Arcade."

The hour was entirely too early for the Arcade to have many visitors. Its interior was remarkably quiet as Halcyon Hal entered it.

It was only at night when the lights flashed and the glasses clinked, and the sing-song of the dealers sounded, and money was lavished as if it were but water by many men who, six months afterward, might not be able to pay for a dinner.

The day clerk was behind the bar, but doing no business. He had evidently been up much of the previous night, for his eyes were heavy and he showed the loss of sleep.

He straightened up as the young sport entered in anticipation of a customer, but Hal merely bowed to him with a pleasant smile and passed him by.

It was Hal's idea that if Ina Brandon was to be met by chance that morning it would be in the placita or in its vicinity, so he turned his steps thither.

The placita was a pleasant place, as it is in most Mexican houses. The Arcade had been originally a dwelling, and was built about an open square—this open square being called a placita. In it flowers bloomed, some birds sang in cages, and an oleander sent up its graceful branches.

Hal stopped before reaching the placita, his attention drawn by voices.

One of them was manifestly the voice of Ina Brandon, and it was sufficiently elevated to permit Halcyon to become somewhat aware of what the words were, though on his part he had no intention of eavesdropping.

He stopped, thrilled through and through as he heard himself spoken of by her.

"What do you know of that Halcyon Hal, Peg-leg?"

This was what he heard, and he knew that the question was addressed to a character known in the town as Peg-leg Hamil.

Peg-leg Hamil was a drunken bum, whom no one respected, and who was as barren of honor and influence as a man can well become.

It hurt the sport to know that Ina Brandon would address such a person.

He did not desire to linger there, and yet he hesitated to advance; and, while he thus hesitated, Peg-leg's answer reached him:

"He's no good. I'll lick 'im fer ye, if you say the word."

"Oh, pshaw! I'm not wanting you to fight him. I just wanted to know about him!"

There was disgust in the tones.

Hal could not stand it to play eavesdropper, and so made a noise and walked through the doorway into the placita as if he had heard nothing at all.

Miss Ina sprang to her feet, her face flushing when she recognized him.

She feared she had been overheard, which was very unpleasant, as she could hardly recall what she had said, for the conversation had been in progress some time before the sport's approach.

The sport stopped, in apparent confusion, and seemed about to retreat. He knew he had no good reason for making a visit to the placita and that he was really out of place there at that time. Still, he hoped his retreat would not be permitted.

Miss Brandon observed his seeming confusion and his backward movement, but did not want him to depart, so, concealing her agitation as well as she could, her face in a smile, she advanced.

"Will you not have a seat, Mr.—ah! I do not know your name, though I have heard you spoken of as Halcyon Hal. You see, I observed you in the gaming rooms last night, and feel almost acquainted with you. It is very pleasant here in the placita in the early morning."

Her manner was all graciousness, and Hal could not feel that she was forward or unladylike in expressing this kind invitation.

Peg-leg Hamil had scrambled out of the seat he had been occupying, and now stood on his one good leg and on his wooden one, uncertain as to his proper course of action.

Ina gave him a swift glance, which, however, did not go unperceived by the sport, and Peg-leg limped slowly out of the placita and disappeared.

"I didn't mean to intrude," the sport remarked, apologetically.

The color that came into his face as he said this was not wholly caused by pleasurable sensations; he almost felt that he was lying.

"It's no intrusion at all!" she sweetly assured, with an inquiring look that caused him to still further introduce himself and acquaint her with his name—Harry Vane.

Then he took the seat indicated, and the two fell to laughing and talking as if they had known each other for months.

She told him of herself and somewhat of the history of the family above stairs.

"I have no parents, you know," glancing at him shyly, "and so I live with Uncle Robert and Cousin Bessie. I am really a stranger in Santa Fe. I know so few people that I feel quite alone; and, really, there are so few people here that one would care to know! Of course, there are the territorial officials and their wives and daughters, and the American merchants and business men! But the town, you know, is almost wholly Mexican."

"Those we would associate with we can't, and those we can associate with we won't!" she frankly avowed. "And so it leaves Bessie and me pretty much alone!"

The sport's face showed his surprise, and she proceeded to explain.

"It's not considered probable that the very best and most desirable people in the world live above a drinking and gambling establishment; and so—well, the best people, the ones we would go with, have not made any supreme efforts to search us out and make our acquaintance!"

"How long have you been here?" he asked, his detective instincts arousing.

She hesitated before replying, as if she thought it probably wise to consider her answer.

"Not a great while. Three or four months. I haven't been here even that long!"

"And where did you reside before coming here?"

She shot him a quick glance.

"Now, I believe you're quizzing me!"

"I beg pardon, then!" and he flushed. "I had no intention of doing so. Curiosity, simply!"

She looked at him suspiciously, and deftly turned the talk into another channel.

The swish of a dress was heard, and Hal became aware of the fact that another female was in the placita.

He turned quickly and saw a woman of uncommon beauty, though of a type different from the beauty of Ina, coming toward him.

At the same moment she caught sight of him and stopped short. She seemed about to retreat. It was plain she had not known of his presence there.

Ina rose and proceeded to introduce the two.

"My cousin, Miss Bessie Brandon!"

Hal Vane was hardly able to properly acknowledge the introduction.

If he had been attracted by the beauty of Ina, he was entranced by that of Bessie Brandon. He thought he had never seen so lovely a face.

She was fair as an angel in some old

painting. Her eyes were blue and soulful, her face the color of a rose, her hair a brown glory.

But, stupefied as he was, he could not fail to note that she was likewise impressed by his appearance, and his courage and his voice came back.

There was an almost imperceptible frown on the dark face of Ina, and an ominous glitter in her dark eyes. She did not fail to observe the sport's perturbed manner and the conscious look on the handsome features of her cousin; and she put the correct interpretation on these manifestations.

Words were not needed to tell Ina Brandon that here was a case of love at first sight! The two were already enraptured with each other! Ina saw it, knew it, and an inward rage and hate stirred her.

But she did not forget her shrewdness. She needed her presence of mind now, if ever.

Therefore she resolved to remain where she was to keep the two apart, if possible, and prevent the acquaintance from proceeding further.

But neither bolts nor bars can sunder true love! Then how could she hope by her mere presence for a short time to accomplish so difficult a thing?

She did not accomplish it; and she knew she had failed before another half-hour had passed.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNSHEATHING OF CLAWS.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Old Shakespeare would have hit it equally well if he had said "like a jealous woman!"

Ina Brandon was a jealous woman; and in her inmost soul raged with a fiendish, tigerish hate, though she was too much of a diplomat to show it while Halcyon Hal was present.

However, she could not wholly restrain her temper when she found herself alone with Bessie Brandon an hour or so later.

The two were in the pleasant sitting-room, above stairs. It was the place where both came with their sewing and crocheting, where the sunlight fell pleasantly on the floor, and where, if any place in the house, one might expect to find quiet and peace.

Bessie was stooping over some work that she had spread out on her lap and Ina bent on her a pair of black eyes that fairly burned with anger.

"I shouldn't think you'd care to show your feelings as you did this morning," she ejaculated, when she had stared at the fair face of Bessie for some length of time.

Bessie Brandon dropped the work into her lap and looked up with something of a startled air.

"What are you talking about, Ina?"

Hitherto, these two women had been on the best of terms. Though differing in almost every way, the mere fact that they were the only women in the big house, with the exception of the servant, Miss Susan Crabtree, had tended to make them tolerant, if not loving.

"Innocent!"

The exclamation held in its depths the suggestive purr of the tigress.

"You'll have to explain if you expect me to understand you," declared Bessie, her blue eyes showing their hidden fire.

"You told that sport how much you thought of him, quite as much as if you'd put it in words! That's what I mean; and I must say I'm surprised at you. Oh, don't look at me in that horrified way! You did."

The blood rushed into the rose-leaf face, and then retreated, leaving it ghastly white.

"How can you say that, Ina?"

"Because it's true! You're in love with that sport, if ever a woman was in love with a man; and you showed it in your face so plain that even he could see it."

The thing so boldly charged was something of which no woman would want to be guilty, though she loved a man ever so sincerely.

Bessie was a womanly woman—the last woman in the world to be knowingly guilty of the thing charged by Ina.

"I think you are mistaken, Ina," she asserted with as much calmness as she could assume. "I know you're mistaken! I couldn't have done such a thing. Why should I—?"

"You know you're in love with him!" Ina spitefully interrupted. "What's the use of pretending that you aren't? It won't fool anybody! It certainly won't deceive me!"

"I don't want to deceive you," regaining, to some extent, her composure. "I liked the appearance of the gentleman very well; but I've not seen enough of him to be in love with him. I don't really know anything about him, and it would be the height of folly to fall in love with a total stranger."

"Nevertheless you've done it!"

Bessie was reasonably sure in her own mind that she had done no such thing, and she said so, rather sharply.

"Of course I expect you to deny it," retorted Ina, viciously. "You wouldn't dare to admit it when you know that your father has selected you for the wife of Talbott Vennor."

"I don't know that my father has any right to select a husband for me. Things are not done that way in this country. This isn't France or Russia, you know."

"All the same, your father expects you to marry Talbott Vennor, and he'll be much disappointed and hurt if you do not. Isn't that so?"

"I do not recognize that my father has any right to order me in a matter of that kind. I shall try to be dutiful and loving, as a daughter should be, but when it comes to selecting a husband, I hope I'm capable of that myself."

She picked up the things that had fallen in her lap and seemed desirous of moving away, that she might escape further words with her cousin on that now distasteful subject.

The latter observed the movement and secretly bridled.

"You will marry Talbott Vennor if your father says for you to!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" Bessie declared, her temper rising. "You know that I detest Talbott Vennor, Ina. Then why do you say such things. No; I wouldn't marry him if father ordered me to, a dozen times."

In her excitement she unconsciously raised her voice, and, at that instant, her father, Bob Brandon, opened the door and stood before her.

Bessie's face flamed and she looked pitifully around as if anxious to escape.

On the broad visage of Number Two there was a look of disquiet and anger.

"What's that you're saying?" he demanded. "You don't propose to do what I want you to do? Is that it?"

"Only in a certain contingency," Bessie gasped.

"Well, you'll do what I want you to do, all the time! If I say for you to marry any certain man, you'll marry him, or I'll know why! I don't see what's started you to talking that way!"

It was evident that Bessie Brandon was afraid of this broad-shouldered, ruffianly father of hers. And it seemed she might have good cause to fear him. He was as strong as an ox, and with a heart that held very little tenderness. He might be rough and harsh to his daughter, or any one else, if occasion demanded.

"Better go to your room!" he said, in words whose tone was a command. "And don't let me hear you talking such nonsense any more."

Ina Brandon was pleased beyond measure with the turn affairs had taken. If given the choosing, she could not have wished for a different termination of their talk. Bessie stood disgraced in the eyes of her father, and Ina chuckled with a heartless delight.

However, she did not want Bob Brandon to read her feelings, and so said, when Bessie had departed.

"Don't be too harsh on her! A woman can't always help falling in love with a handsome man!"

"What do you mean?" Bob Brandon questioned.

"Oh, I thought you knew, or I should have kept my mouth shut."

An anxious, but hypocritical look sat on her face.

"I don't know anything about it. What are you driving at?"

"Well," with an uneasy laugh, "I was just joking her about that good-looking Spangled Sport that tumbled the cowboy over down-stairs last night." She met him this morning; and—well, I told her she'd fallen in love with him!"

The frown on Bob Brandon's brow grew blacker.

"So, you think the wind lies in that direction? I'll keep my eyes open! All I've got to say is if that sport comes foolin' about here with any such notions as that, he'd better go order his coffin!"

With this ominous declaration Bob Brandon, or Number Two, left the room in the footsteps of his daughter, as if he meant to have a talk with her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PUEBLO VISITOR.

Ina Brandon sat looking after her uncle, an almost incomprehensible smile on her dark face. She seemed to be listening, rather than watching, and no doubt anticipated the hearing of angry words between father and daughter.

As she sat thus, gazing through the open door, she started and gave a little scream.

The head of an Indian was thrust into view.

There was nothing malevolent or threatening in the face thus made visible. It held no paint. On the contrary, it wore an appearance of craft.

The Indian's quick ear caught the scream and his keen eyes fell on the figure of the girl.

He saw he had blundered and was likely to get himself into trouble.

"Injun make mistake!" he grunted, not using the better English of which he was capable. "Poor Injun mean no harm!"

Then he glided from Ina's sight before she could find her voice to cry out.

She did not cry out when he was gone, but sat there, as if frozen into a statue.

The Indian who had thus unexpectedly thrust his face through the doorway was none other than Juan Tinto, the Governor of the Pueblo of Juarez.

His manner had shown that he was searching for something or some one. Being not very well versed in the civilized method of doing things, he had thought it good to go about from place to place, peering and prying with the covert stealth he would have used in the wilderness.

From the upper room he proceeded to the stairway and descended to the placita.

But the same stealthy method was still used.

He did not walk boldly into the placita, but halted and peered in from behind the stair railing.

His was a queer figure, as he stood in that crouching attitude.

His dark face, guileless of paint, seemed to have been burned and blackened by the suns of a hundred blistering years, though the general appearance of his features did not make him out to be old.

It is often difficult to guess with any accuracy at the age of an Indian, but Juan Tinto was not above forty-five or fifty.

His look was keen and intelligent, but full of craft. A blanket girt about his loins dropped to his heels. His long locks were braided, tied with red yarn, and hung down on his shoulders.

The black eyes lighted as they swept the interior of the placita and rested at length on the handsome form of the Spangled Sport.

Hal was still lingering there, hoping against hope that he might again be permitted to see the woman who had made so deep a mark on his impressionable nature.

Not far away the bum, Peg-leg Hamil, reclined lazily in a rustic chair.

He was but a few feet distant from the sport, yet neither seemed to take any notice of the other.

Each was, however, well aware of the other's presence, and watched the other with an occasional furtive glance.

The Spangled Sport was slowly sauntering to and fro near the oleander, and on him the Pueblo continued to bend his glances.

For full five minutes the Pueblo thus crouched; then he slipped from the stairway and advanced into the placita.

So silent was he that the sport was not conscious of his presence until touched on the shoulder by the Pueblo's hand.

He wheeled quickly at that touch, when the Pueblo whispered:

"A word with you, senior."

Though so lowly spoken, the request reached the ears of Peg-leg Hamil.

The bum shifted his position, so that he could see as well as hear.

"I have paper for you if your name is Vennor; but, money first!"

Both the sport and the bum were amazed. The bum was amazed at the revelation thus made, or rather suggested, and the sport was almost thunderstruck by the fact that the Pueblo had guessed his identity!

Halcyon's disguise was good enough to deceive even the cowboy, who knew him well. It was so good that not one of his enemies had dreamed it a disguise at all; yet the keen eyes of this Indian had seen through it.

"I have paper for you," the Pueblo reiterated; "but money first."

With a quick movement he drew a folded sheet from beneath his blanket.

Peg-leg Hamil, whose wits had been quickened, and whose hearing was now strained to the utmost, appeared to feel that an interesting crisis was at hand.

With a deft motion he removed the wooden leg, then lifted himself on his sound one and attacked the Indian.

"Threaten a white man, do you, you infernal scoundrel?" he howled, bringing the wooden leg down with vicious force. "I'll beat some sense into your fool head!"

The leg missed the Pueblo's head and came down on the right shoulder, beating down the uplifted arm, and causing the paper to drop to the floor, where it lay for a moment, unobserved by the bum.

"Tackle a white man right hyar, in this house!" the bum continued to shout, plying the leg again and again.

The sport was about to spring on the bum, when he beheld the paper and picked it up.

The attack of the one-legged man was too much for the Pueblo. Cries and questions came from the gaming room, and, frightened by these, the redskin did not stop to regain the letter, but bolted wildly from the place.

Peg-leg Hamil had, as he believed, accomplished his purpose, which was to prevent communication between the Indian and the sport. He did not know what the nature of that communication might be, but he feared it, for the simple reason that the Pueblo's method of approach had been so cautious and mysterious.

Peg-leg Hamil was far from being a dullard, and there was something in the sport's manner he had not liked from the first.

Peg-leg was a member of the hooded band that acknowledged the leadership of Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor.

"The idee of an Injun tacklin' you in that way," he panted, turning to the sport. "It do beat all! If that fu'st lick o' mine had 'a' hit 'im square, it would 'a' killed him, and served him right, too!"

Thus muttering, he turned to explain the cause of the commotion to the loiterers who were pouring from the other room.

CHAPTER IX.

A BOOTLESS SEARCH.

The Spangled Sport did not deem it advisable to remain in the placita and face the questions of the throng. His pulses were bounding uncontrollably, and he

knew that his feelings could be half-guessed in his flushed face.

Besides, he wanted to get somewhere as quickly as possible, where he could read the communication brought by the Pueblo undisturbed.

He felt sure it was from his father! It could be from no one else, he thought!

Peg-leg Hamil became voluble with explanations, and the sport slipped from a side-door, out through a corridor, into the street.

No one was in sight, and, almost at a run, he hurried along toward his room. As soon as it was reached, he bolted the door and drew out the letter.

The paper was now wrinkled and soiled, but the contents were what caught the sport's eye.

The handwriting was his father's, and the letter ran thus:

"My Dear Son—I am hoping this will fall into your hands—I am praying for it! The governor of this place, whose name is Juan Tinto, has told me he believes a son of mine is in Santa Fe. I have had him watching the newcomers for some time. I told him you would pay him money if he could find you, and, after a while, I got him to promise to get a letter to you. This is it! I am among Pueblo Indians, though I can't tell you just where, but it surely can't be a great distance from Santa Fe—"

Then the letter went on to tell of his visit to the Barrancas Mine; of his encounter with and escape from the hooded outlaws; and of how he had stumbled into the Pueblo village, where he was held a prisoner.

"My son, make it the first business of your life to rescue me from this place," the letter continued. "I feel that I shall die, if I am forced to remain here!"

There were terms of affection and endearment, and reiterated requests for help, ending with a desire that Tinto should be properly recompensed.

The Spangled Sport read it over and over, until its contents were fairly burned into his brain.

It filled him with hope and joy.

There was no doubt now. His father was alive!

Rescue him? He would rescue his father if it took his life blood to do it!

That was his resolution; yet it was balked at the very outset. He did not know where the Pueblo was. The valley of the Rio Grande contained, and still contains, many pueblos—many villages of those strange agricultural Indians, who were almost as far on the road to civilization when Coronado visited the country as they are to-day.

"I will find him!" he thought.

And, with this, he left the room and rushed out to make a hasty search of the town.

He knew that his peril had been tenfold increased; that Peg-leg had told already to Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor of the visit and the words of the Pueblo.

Still, he would not abandon his search, would not abate any of its thoroughness.

At the corner of a narrow street he came face to face with Lariat Bill Larkins.

Larkins put a finger to his lips, winked solemnly, and disappeared through an opening.

Hal followed him.

"Better hide out in the bresh fer a while," Larkins advised, when sure they were alone together.

The sport understood.

"Are they after me?"

"The story's bein' circulated that you hain't jist the clear, white artikel! That you murdered your gran'mother, and knifed yer aunt, and poured b'ilin' lead into the years of yer great uncle—"

"Oh, stop your nonsense! You know nothing of the kind is being said."

"Well, mebbe them hain't jist the words!" Lariat confessed. "But they is mighty p'izen strong ag'in ye, an' it's my honest advice that you hide out in the bresh till I kin look into the thing."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," the sport declared. "You know what's caused the talk—what started the row?"

The cowboy shook his head.

"Not edzactly, I don't."

Hurriedly Hal explained.

"I never paid much 'tention to these yere Pueblos, at any time. But, I tell you what! We kin go frum one village to another tell we do find yer dad! That's what we kin do!"

"And, in the mean time, let these enemies get ahead of us and kill my father, as they have already tried to do."

The cowboy became thoughtful.

"Something in that! Well, I'll keep my eyes open and my years spread like an elephant's! We'll find out where this Injun with the Mexican name lives!"

He looked questioningly at the sport.

"Oh, I'm not going into hiding!" the latter averred. "Not just yet! I'm to take a hand in the search. We must find Juan Tinto! The rest will be easy!"

The cowboy whistled his admiration of the young sport's pluck.

"Look out fer yerself, then! I'll do my sheer of the watchin', but I can't be everywhere!"

He stepped again into the street and moved away with apparent unconcern, and, ten minutes later, the sport came forth and also disappeared from the vicinity.

All day long Hal continued his search, without success. All day long the keen eyes and ears of the cowboy were used, with no better success. Juan Tinto could not be found by them.

CHAPTER X.

A HASTY CONFERENCE.

There was good reason why neither the sport nor the cowboy could find the Pueblo, Juan Tinto.

As soon as Peg-leg Hamil had contrived, by much lying and braggadocio of statement, to satisfy the inquiries of the throng which rushed on him from the gaming rooms, and had replaced the doughty leg, he hobbled out of the placita and went himself in search of the Indian.

He had seen Tinto often, knew who he was, and had a reasonably accurate idea of the point to which the Pueblo would make before leaving the town.

He succeeded in finding Tinto without much loss of time, and induced the Indian to accompany him back to the Arcade.

"It's money in your pocket, and, I take it, money's the thing you want," he urged, when Tinto hesitated and spoke of the unprovoked assault.

"That was just a put on. I didn't hit hard, did I? If I did, I didn't mean to! I saw you was after money; that you had something to sell to that feller fer the hard cash; and I knowed that my bosses would pay you a deal more fer it than he would."

"But it is gone!" Tinto sullenly grumbled.

"What's gone?"

"The paper that I was to give to the stranger. You knocked it out of my hand with that stick leg."

Peg-leg stared and whistled, and muttered an imprecation.

"The dickens I did! You may bet, now, I didn't intend to; and I'd give something if I had it in my fist, this minute. But, I reckon you know what the paper said—what was writ on it?"

Tinto shook his head.

His feelings, as well as his body, were sore from that attack.

"Oh, come, now! I know you can tell something about what the letter said! It was a letter, wasn't it? Who sent it?"

Still the Pueblo shook his head.

"Hangin' out fer money, air ye? Well, if you've got anything worth payin' for you may bet I can take you to the chaps that'll whack up in good shape. How much was you expectin', now? How many dollars fer deliverin' the letter? Likely it's been picked up by some of the boys, and we'll git to know what was in it anyway; but we'll do the square thing, and pay you jist the same as if you had put it into our fists."

"What do you say?" as Tinto still remained immovable. "Come with me back to the buildin', and I'll let you have a talk

with some men that have got bushels of the yaller gold to pay out to a man that's willin' to help 'em!"

A covetous gleam shone in Tinto's black eyes. He knew the value of gold as well as any man in New Mexico. What could not gold purchase? Because they had such quantities of it was the reason the whites were so far superior to the Indians, Tinto reasoned.

"How much?" he asked, his crafty eyes shining. "How much the money, if I go with you?"

The bum knew he had gained his point.

"You'll be give enough to satisfy you, I kin promise you that, if you'll string your story straight."

Only by guessing did the bum yet know that Tinto's visit and the letter were of interest to the membership of the hooded band.

"That's right, you'll come! Foller me, then, and be careful who sees you! Yere we go!"

He stepped softly into a narrow, silent side street, that seemed to lead toward the suburbs rather than toward the heart of the town, and Juan Tinto, his cupidity growing, followed quietly at his heels.

They had not proceeded a dozen steps before the bum swung open a door that led into a low building.

Through this he made his way, seeming to know the route well, and then, from one building to another, without once showing himself to passers on the thoroughfares, he passed to the upper rooms of the Arcade, and to a particularly private room at the very rear of the building.

Tinto followed with dog-like faithfulness through all the windings of the devious route.

"Now, you'll stay yer jist a minute," said the bum. "I'm agoing to look up them gentlemen that I was a-tellin' you about, who've got the money, and who'll want to hear what you've got to say 'bout that letter."

With this he vanished.

So long was he gone that Tinto grew very uneasy, though by no look or movement did he show it.

At last, when the Pueblo's patience had been well tried, the bum reappeared, while at his heels walked Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor—the Talbott Vennor known to the people of Santa Fe.

They entered the room where Tinto sat, giving him a suspicious stare, as Peg-leg closed the door and introduced him.

"This is the feller what, if I hain't mistaken, knows something that'll interest you."

Vennor took a ten dollar gold piece from a purse and pushed it across the table toward Tinto, who picked it up and eagerly concealed it beneath the folds of his blanket.

"What was in that letter which you brought a while ago, that my friend's been telling me of?" Vennor questioned.

Tinto did not answer.

"What's 'come of yer tongue, Injun?" Peg-leg put in. "Why don't you speak when you're spoke to? Is that there the way to treat a gentleman of wealth and ejercation?"

"More money!" said Tinto, with imperturbable composure.

The three whites stared at him.

"More money!" he repeated.

"Thanks you're a gold mine!" Peg-leg snorted, in anger.

"I've given you ten!" Vennor declared. "Earn that, first, by answering the question I asked you."

"I don't know!" said Tinto.

"Don't know what?"

"What was in the letter?"

He held out his hand for more money, thinking he had now earned the amount already passed over.

Vennor grumblingly put another coin into the outstretched palm.

"Who was the letter from? You certainly know that!"

"From a man who says he is Talbott Vennor!"

The trio started as if a bomb had exploded at their feet.

"Where is he? Are you sure? What do you know about him?"

The questions tumbled over each other—some expressed by Vennor and some by Bob Brandon.

Tinto calmly put out his hand.

"Oh, bother!" Vennor cried. "I'm not going to give you a ten every time you open your mouth! If you think so you're a fool! I'll give you thirty dollars more if you'll talk right straight on without stopping and answer our questions! Not a cent more!"

He took out three more coins and jingled them alluringly.

Tinto's eyes sparkled with greed.

"This man who says he is Talbott Vennor is at the Pueblo of Juarez. You know where that is. He is held there a prisoner. He cannot get out, and no one can get him out!"

"Go on!" was the order, but Bob Brandon, who did not want to believe this, began to cross-question.

If the real Talbott Vennor was a prisoner of the Pueblos, then he had not given up his life in the Valley of Death on that stormy night as Brandon had always thought.

Such an escape would be a reflection on the honesty, the integrity, and the courage of Bob Brandon—Number Two. His mates might even think the condemned man had escaped by bribery.

So it was no wonder that Brandon began a course of cross-questioning calculated to test the accuracy of the Pueblo's statements.

But Tinto could not be shaken from his assertions; and, in confirmation of the truth of his account, he detailed how Vennor had come to the estufa and how his imprisonment had been decreed.

The crafty Indian knew that he was doing things and making communications which would, if revealed to his brother Pueblos, anger them against him, and perhaps imperil his life, but the golden coins to be received already burnt his hands and scorched away every scruple.

"You say he can't be got out?" Vennor questioned.

"It is as I say. He can't be got out! He is watched day and night!"

"You could smuggle him out, could you not?" Vennor asked.

Tinto shook his head.

"Well, you could get rid of him if well paid for it, couldn't you?"

Again that negative shake.

"Why not, if the pay is big?"

"Pueblos' eyes too wide, ears too big! Tinto's life would pay for it! They sleep as the cat sleeps."

"A hundred dollars!"

Tinto was obdurate. He loved money, but he loved life more, and he was certain his life would pay the forfeit if he undertook the thing now asked.

"We will come and tear down your old village!" Brandon threatened.

It was an unwise speech, as the flashings of the Pueblo's black orbs showed.

Unheeding this, Brandon went on.

"I half believe you've been telling all these things just to get money, anyway! I don't see how it's possible that I did not kill that man! Why, I shot him through and through!"

Vennor whispered a caution and then continued to the Pueblo.

"I don't doubt a word of the story brought by our friend, Tinto. By some miracle the fellow escaped. You are not to blame, Brandon, for you did your duty! I think, though, that our friend here will reconsider his decision and agree to help us. Will you not?"

But Tinto was deaf to all entreaties. He knew he had put the Indians of Juarez in great danger, and his fears began to rise. He would promise nothing, and, though the sum named was put in his hands, he refused to talk further on the subject.

He wanted to depart and make his way out of the town.

This, however, the whites would not permit. A search failed to reveal the

letter dropped by Tinto in the placita. They knew it might have fallen into unfriendly hands, and were cautious in consequence.

But, with the gathering of the shades of night, Tinto was permitted to leave the room.

CHAPTER XI.

CLEVERLY OUTWITTED.

There was a combination of moonlight and starlight, which ought to have made the night very bright, but which did not, for the reason that clouds scurried across the sky and plunged everything, at intervals, into shadow.

It was the worst possible light for clever trailing, as Bob Brandon found to his disgust. He was out on the hills to the northeast of Santa Fe, doing his best to follow the footsteps of the departing Pueblo.

It was difficult work—difficult and dangerous—and Brandon was in no pleasant humor in consequence; but a firm and deadly resolve filled his heart. He felt disgraced in the eyes of his confederates and was determined to redeem himself.

To him had been delegated the task of ridding the band, as well as the world, of the real Talbott Vennor. He had bungled the work; Talbott Vennor, from the East, was still alive, and was likely to become again a menace to the daring gang who had usurped his rich estates.

He had laid his plans carefully, if hurriedly. He intended to kill Juan Tinto; then to seek Vennor, in the heart of the pueblo of Juarez, and there complete the work first assigned him.

It was not safe, he reasoned, to permit the Pueblo Tinto to live. He knew too much. Such men are always best out of the way.

Having arrived at these conclusions, he was doing his best to carry out his purposes; but those clouds did not favor him. They constantly intervened, with their shadows, to hide the Pueblo from his gaze; and, when they swept on and let the moonlight stream out again there was always the infinite danger of being seen by the wary Indian, now just ahead of his pursuer.

Brandon did not doubt that the latter was quick of eye and ear.

"Curse the luck, anyway!" he growled, time and again, when the moonlight or the shadow made him pause.

Still he pertinaciously stuck to the trail.

Fortunately, the chief, after a while, dropped into a little path, probably a sheep or game trail, so that the trail was easy to follow—too easy, indeed, for at any moment Brandon himself might be seen, or might be caught by an ambush.

So he crept softly on, peering into the deceptive gloom, and was becoming convinced that the Indian had pressed straight ahead, when a form seemed to rise from beneath his feet, and the gleam of a knife shone in the dull moonlight.

Juan Tinto had known for a good half-hour that he was being followed; and, when he found it difficult to shake off the pursuer, had resolved on the bolder course of attack.

Brandon, though completely taken by surprise, was as alert as a panther, and swung out his left hand in a lunging blow, while with his right hand he felt for the weapons in his belt.

The blow knocked the knife from the Pueblo's grasp, and sent it spinning far from the trail; but that blow meant a grapple and life struggle. Strong and supple as he was, Brandon found that in the Pueblo he had a dangerous foe.

The chief, seizing Brandon's right wrist, kept him from drawing a weapon; then to and fro on the sandy trail, like athletes, they swayed and whirled.

Brandon drew in his breath, bent every ounce of strength in a mighty effort, and hurled the Indian from him. But, Tinto was back again, even before his enemy could get the pistol from his belt, and this time Tinto sunk his fingers in Brandon's throat in a grip like that of death.

In vain did Brandon writhe and twist

and spasm. That terrible grip could not be broken. The Pueblo clung like a bulldog, and steadily tightened the pressure until the white man's face blackened and his brain reeled.

Brandon's strength went, too, as his mind clouded. His eyes seemed starting from their sockets, his tongue was thrust out and flecked with a bloody foam.

But, to the last, while consciousness lingered, Brandon would not give in, though his efforts grew feeble and ineffectual.

Then, with a rush, the Pueblo bore him to the earth, and a little triumphant yell gurgled and died away unuttered on his lips.

The true savage nature was aroused in the Pueblo; he would have liked to tear the scalp-lock from the head of his foe and sing and dance over it, but caution forbid that. Bob Brandon had many and powerful friends back in Santa Fe—friends who would hunt down and punish his slayer, and, thus remembering, Tinto stayed his knife and squeezed back the yell that welled for utterance.

Still, his face worked with convulsive hate, and with jubilant triumph as well. He had conquered. The foe that had dogged his steps, with murderous intent no doubt, was silent and mute now, and powerless for harm.

The redskin now relaxed his hold of the throat and began to fish in his blanket, presently drawing out some sheepskin thongs.

These he tied about the legs and arms, and also thrust a couple of them between Brandon's jaws as a gag.

And when he had done that, and made sure that no one else was following his trail, he hurried away, doubling and redoubling on his tracks, with all the cunning of a fox before approaching the pueblo of Juarez.

As for Bob Brandon, he lay out on the sandy hills unconscious for a short time, and, seemingly, doomed to remain there until help reached him.

When he came back to life and motion, and realized how signally he had failed, he looked up at the sky and groaned.

Then he began to wriggle and twist at the cords that held him.

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGELY-BROUGHT WARNING.

That same evening, and while Bob Brandon was trying to wriggle out of his bonds, the Spangled Sport sat in his room, engrossed in unpleasant thought.

His search for the Pueblo had been so wholly unsuccessful that he was wellnigh discouraged, and was wondering what he should do.

His cogitations were interrupted by a gentle tap on the door.

It seemed reasonably certain that the cowboy, Bill Larkins, would never tap in that manner, and, as the sport had no reason to expect a call from any one else, he put a revolver within reach of his hand before he bade the caller enter.

He did not rise to open the door, but simply called out from where he sat, with his hand in readiness to level the weapon.

Hal was considerably astonished when the door opened and a slightly-built young man entered.

The young man evidently was nervous and hurried, and carefully closed the door as if fearing to be seen or heard.

All the while he kept his face averted, so that Hal had no idea as to who his visitor could be.

The singular manner of the caller did not tend to reassure the sport.

Then the face was turned toward him, and a low and well-remembered voice fell on his ears, compelling the most intense amazement.

He was on his feet instantly, exclamations and apologies on his lips.

The face and voice were Bessie Brandon's.

The sport could not understand, of course, what had induced Miss Brandon to assume male attire and thus visit him, though he was sure there was sufficient warrant for her extraordinary conduct.

Her face was suffused with blushes, and she was greatly agitated. It was

quite clear that she had only come in that manner after a bitter fight with herself and because she was urged by the strongest reasons.

Hal, quite at a loss for words, placed a chair for her.

"I will not remain long enough to—to justify it!" she stammered. "I have come to tell you—"

He again insisted that she should be seated, but she steadfastly refused.

"You will think me very unwomanly," she panted. "But, indeed, I hope you will judge me not too harshly. When you know all—"

"I have come to bring you warning. You are in the greatest danger! You must not stay another night in this town! Not another hour!"

Her sentences were broken and jerky.

"I think I can anticipate what you would say," he said, assuringly.

"You cannot. You cannot know what I know! Oh, I could hardly believe it when I heard it with my own ears. You are to be made the victim of a plot! You are to be murdered. It has been decreed—and, oh, God! that I should have to say it—my own father was one of the men I heard talking!"

She was wildly excited.

"Pray be seated!" he again urged. "I think I know more of this than you will believe possible. I am not unacquainted with my danger! I hope you magnify it! But, whatever it is, I do not see my way clear to leave Santa Fe. I have a work to do that must be done here, no matter as to the consequences!"

She saw that he was not going to accept her statements and act immediately on them; she feared that she must argue with him and be more specific. So she sank into the proffered chair.

The color had faded out of her face. It was now set and white, almost ghastly. Powerful emotions were swaying her.

She grew calmer as she talked, and told him rapidly, but with considerable detail, how she had overheard the close of the conference between her father and Vennor and the Pueblo. Also how, after Tinto had gone, she had listened to the details of a plot against the life of the young man.

She did not seem to understand wholly the cause of her father's and Vennor's enmity, but had heard enough to convince her that it was most deadly.

"You are to be waylaid and murdered in the streets at the very first opportunity," she went on. "You know how narrow these streets are, and how dark at night. Such a plot could be easily carried out. You know that drunken men come and go, and that there is much noise. There could be no better place for secret murder!"

Then she reurged him to leave Santa Fe at the earliest possible moment, and to remain away until it would be safe for him to return.

"I am staying too long!" she apologized, with a little gasp, as she became aware of the length to which the interview had progressed. "Perhaps I ought not to have come, but I couldn't stay away under the circumstances."

Her eyes sought his, craving pardon. It was evident she feared he would regard her act as unwomanly and immodest.

Reading this thought, he could but protest, with thanks, but he would not promise to leave Santa Fe.

She had already explained how it had been impossible to send warning by word of mouth, or even by letter, without too great risk to herself.

She seemed to again realize the risk to herself as she turned to go, and shrunk back from the door.

"Oh! if I should be seen! Should be followed."

"Let me accompany you," he volunteered.

"No, no!" was her agitated ejaculation. "I must go alone, just as I came! Should we be seen together, and my identity discovered—"

Her voice shook with fear and horror.

The sport seemed equally distressed.

"Just as you think best."

He could not say more, for she opened the door and rushed from the room.

He took up his hat as if to follow her, then put it aside and dropped into a seat. He felt nervous and unstrung. Such a visit! Such a warning!

"God bless her!" was his fervent thought. "She is as brave as she is kind. It would be awful, though, if she should be arrested and her identity revealed. I hope no one saw her come here!"

He was too much in love with her to mentally upbraid her, even if he had thought her deserving of such treatment. As it was, anything she might do was, to him, the proper course of action.

"But I can't leave Santa Fe," he mused. "That is out of the question. To do that would stop my work, and to leave and not return means that I shouldn't be able to see her again!"

"No! I shall not leave Santa Fe!"

CHAPTER XIII.

LARIAT BILL'S MISTAKE.

Lariat Bill Larkins, having found it impossible to lay eyes on Juan Tinto, had given over the search in despair, and was returning to the room of the sport, for the purpose of talking the matter over, when he saw a young man come out of the shadows just underneath the sport's room.

Under any circumstances this would have been enough to cause suspicion, and now, the very attitude and air of this young man were all of a character to rouse the keenest distrust.

"There's a chap that's been up to devilment!" the cowboy muttered; and, thus deciding, he resolved to follow the young stranger and learn who he was and where he had been.

Lariat's faithfulness was of a dog-like quality. He never forgot or deserted a friend. And the sport had on his affections an especially strong grip. All day, nearly, had he been toiling to assist his friend, and now he turned about in pursuit of what he thought a new foe.

There was a chance that the young man whose steps the cowboy now followed had not been near the room of the sport and had had no thought of wronging that individual, but this chance did not enter into Lariat's calculations. He usually acted on the principle, "Believe a man guilty until he proves his innocence!"

Bessie Brandon—for she it was—would have been frightened beyond measure if she had dreamed the cowboy was creeping after her in the direction of the Arcade.

There were many people on the streets—as was commonly the case after nightfall—but none of them appeared to give her a second glance, and her courage grew.

She avoided as much as possible the lighted spaces about the few street lamps and hugged the shadows of the walls.

These performances were not lost on Lariat Bill, who saw in them a proof that this young man was a "deep one," who needed watching.

"Can't gineraly fool me!" he muttered, as he slipped on, gripping his rope. "That chap's been up to dirt! Wonder what it was, now? Don't look like he's of the gritty kind that'd try to stick a knife into Haley!"

Bill finally saw the supposed young man edge through a narrow slit in the wall—a sort of alley—and hasten toward the rear rooms of the Arcade.

This was more suggestive and mysterious than anything that had occurred, according to Lariat's idea.

He saw in it, he fancied, almost certain proof that the young man had been spying on the sport, and that he had come from Bob Brandon's apartment; in fact, that he was a tool of Brandon's and the other leaders of the hooded band.

And, thus believing, Lariat quickened his steps and clutched with tenser grip the lasso.

"Hanged if I don't find out who that chap is, if I have to rope him," he avowed, with uncommon grimness. "Don't recollect that I ever see a young man of jist that build in this hyer town."

Bessie walked directly, but with quiet

steps, toward the entrance to the placita, through which she meant to gain access to the upper portion of the house.

She much feared the ordeal she would be subjected to in the placita, for it was pretty certain that a number of loiterers would be there, as the hour for their gathering had arrived.

But she was not destined to enter the placita undisturbed.

Lariat was at her heels. He seemed to read something of her thought, and his great fear that this young stranger would get away caused him to precipitate the disclosure on which he had determined.

Quickly loosening the riata he gathered it in a neat coil for a throw.

Bessie was fairly in the doorway, when the rope rushed through the air with a suggestive swish, and the cleverly coiled noose fell over her head and tightened about her neck and shoulders.

As it tightened, it dragged her from her balance, and, with a scared, gurgling cry, she fell to the stone flagging, though not with sufficient force to injure her.

Then her terror asserted itself, and, pushing the rope away from her throat, she sent forth a scream for help.

It had not passed her lips when Bob Brandon appeared in the doorway, drawn by the fall and the low cry, and, when that scream swept through the placita he recognized the tones as those of his daughter.

A more bewildered and astonished man never existed. That was Bessie's voice, as he was willing to swear, though it seemed inconceivable that the young man sprawled on the flagging could be Bessie.

Lariat Bill was also much astonished, and leaped forward, throwing off the rope from the neck of the girl as he did so.

"What's this?" Brandon demanded.

"You tell me, boss!" said Lariat. "It goes ahead of me! Sounds like a woman an' looks like a man!"

Covered with confusion and almost on the borders of hysteria, Bessie struggled to her feet and turned her humiliated face toward Brandon and the cowboy.

They fell back with cries of amazement and it seemed that Bessie would sink again to the cold flagging.

"It's a horse on me!" exclaimed the cowboy, at a loss for words. "Never dreamed of such a thing, 'pon my honor! Wouldn't never 'a' throwed that rope if I had. I'm allus a-goin' an' doin' somethin' fer which I ought to be kicked good and hard, and now I ought to be kicked gooder and harder than ever in my life."

"I reckon I'd better make myself scarce! I'll 'pologize, er do anything, er pay any damage bill, when you two get yer bearin's and know what you want to do—but—now, I guess I'd better slide. So long."

With this he fled ignominiously from the scene, trailing the rope after him and coiling it as he ran.

He was shrewd enough to see that there was going to be a violent outburst on the part of the father—an explosion that might forever change the kind feelings heretofore existing between father and daughter, and he saw, too, that men were swarming that way from the direction of the gaming rooms.

"Made a mess of it!" he groaned, as he gained the street and hurried along, anxious to put as many yards as possible between himself and the storm brewing behind the walls of the Arcade.

"Phew! Who'd a thought of such a thing! It's jist unaccountable! I'll have to tell Halcyon 'bout it! An' she come from to'ards his room! Geewhillikins! What does that mean?"

CHAPTER XIV.

"A PRETTY KETTLE OF FISH!"

How had Bob Brandon regained the Arcade?

He was left struggling frantically to undo his bonds out on the sandy hills to

the northeast of Santa Fe, where he had been overcome by Juan Tinto.

Tinto's work had not been done as thoroughly as it might have been. Doubtless he had purposely left the cords but half tied. He had no desire to increase his already great danger. He wanted no more trouble with the vicious white man.

But Bob Brandon, when he felt the cords loosen in answer to his savage tugs, did not credit Tinto with any kind intentions. His wrath was at the boiling point, and he thought only of evening things with the Pueblo, forgetful that he was the first wrong-doer, and that Tinto had had ample justification for all he did.

After considerable straining the cords were sufficiently loosened to allow Brandon to draw his wrists out of them, and then he speedily removed those that held his feet, and the one that served as a gag.

"Ugh!" he gritted. "That dirty old sheepskin is enough to make a horse sick! I wish I had that Pueblo by the neck!"

He lifted himself painfully and stared off across the hills, fitfully lighted by moon and stars; but the Pueblo had put many, many yards between himself and his foe already.

Bob Brandon knew how utterly useless it was now to attempt to trail Tinto further. It was impossible, in that uncertain light. It would have been almost impossible had the light been the best of sunlight.

"Curse the luck!" Brandon growled, nursing his sore mouth, and expectorating from time to time with much vigor. "I'll get even with him yet."

But not to-night! He knew that, and he turned reluctantly about and retraced his way rapidly to the town.

He had not been in the town ten minutes, and not in the Arcade five, when he came out from the placita, as noted, and saw and heard Bessie, as she was hurled down by the cowboy's rope.

As stated, his astonishment was intense. It passed all bounds. He was almost unable to believe the evidence of his eyes and ears.

"Go to your room at once!" was his stern command, as the cowboy disappeared and Bessie stood, shiveringly, before him.

He was not anxious that those coming in from the gaming rooms should know just what was the trouble, so he pushed Bessie on in front of him to the stairway that gave entrance to the apartments above.

By placing his bulkier form between Bessie and the crowd he screened her pretty well from observation, and no one of all those staring toward them dreamed who the slightly-built young man was that Brandon had hurried from the placita.

Bessie's limbs so trembled with weakness that she could hardly mount the stairway. The thing she had dreaded most had come to pass. Her father must suspect horrible things of her!

Consecutive thought was utterly impossible, and more than once she felt that she was about to drop on the stairway in a dead faint.

The unconsciousness of such a condition would almost have been a welcome blessing at that moment.

When at the head of the stairway she turned into her own room. Brandon followed, with heavy, ominous steps, his shod boots seeming to tread on her heart.

Bessie rushed into her room and flung herself on the bed, burying her face in her hands, after trying to screen herself to some extent by drawing a bit of the bed covering about her form.

She was sobbing in a heart-broken fashion when Brandon entered.

"Will you explain this bit of masquerading?" he demanded, halting in the center of the room and looking at her in a hard and stony way.

He pulled to the door and locked it against intruders.

"You may just as well answer me first

as last, Bessie," he said, in those terrible tones, when she did not reply. "I'm going to know the truth."

Thus questioned, she arose to a sitting posture on the edge of the bed, and looked at him with pleading glances.

Yet she did not expect mercy or commiseration. She knew that the most merciless condemnation awaited her.

And, what had she to offer? What reasonable excuse could she frame?

"I am not the guilty thing you think me," she quavered. "Please do not look at me in that awful way. I have really done no wrong."

"What is the meaning of them clothes? What do you mean by galloping the streets of Santa Fe in breeches? Is that the proper caper for a lady?"

"I suppose I did wrong in that," and her face flamed with humiliation. "But, really, that is the only wrong I have done! The only thing I am willing to acknowledge as wrong!"

She was fighting away from the confession she saw she would be forced to make.

He threw himself grimly into a chair. He meant to remain there until he knew the whole truth, as she could see.

"You had some reason for putting on them things," he asserted. "Tell me what it was. You can't make me believe you'd take such risk just for a lark! What was your little game?"

She became more erect and rigid.

"And if I refuse to tell?"

"I don't think it'll be healthy!" his eyes taking on a threatening light.

A little shiver ran through her, and her eyes grew brighter and bigger.

"You wouldn't beat me? You wouldn't use violence?"

"Perhaps not; but I allow you'd better tell! I'll find it out, anyway, now that I know there's something to discover. So you might just as well out with it!"

"You put on them togs and went out on the street for some reason! You don't want me to think that there's some chap in this town that you're secretly meeting that way? I can't hardly think that of you, Bessie."

The reproach and suspicion cut her even more than bitter words would have done.

"No! No!" she cried, putting up her hands. "I'd rather you'd believe anything than that. I have good cause for not wanting to tell you, but the cause is not what you think."

"I didn't say I thought you'd do such a thing; I merely allowed that you wouldn't! I reckon I'll think a good deal more of you if you speak plain."

Still she hesitated.

"Must I tell?"

"It's the only way to make me believe in you again! Can't you see that it is?"

"If I swear I meant no harm, will that answer?"

He doggedly shook his head.

"Not a bit of it. I've got to know the thing straight! It ain't to be expected that I wouldn't have big suspicions under the circumstances. It ain't counted just the thing for decent women to parade the streets in men's togs. Where'd you get 'em, anyhow?"

"They belong to the young man that occupies the room below stairs. He's been gone several days. I sneaked into his room and took them!"

Again that black frown came to Brandon's face.

"Go on!" he cried.

Then, cringingly, she confessed that she had visited the room of Halcyon Hal for the purpose of warning him against the death to which he had been decreed.

The frown got blacker and blacker as Brandon listened.

"You heard this?" he demanded, referring to the talk in the back room, where the death of the sport had been decided on. "You never heard anything of the kind?"

She was about to protest against this denial, and insist on her truthfulness, when there sounded an unmistakable sneeze under the bed.

With an oath, Bob Brandon drew his

revolver, at the same time going down on his knees and peering under the bed, ready to return the shot he half-anticipated.

His surprise had not been greater that night. His face almost touched the scared face of Ina Brandon.

He dragged her from beneath the bed, knotting his muscular fingers in her clothing, and jammed her down in a chair.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish!" he ejaculated, with venomous bitterness.

Ina was more confused, if possible, than Bessie had been. She had heard Brandon's questions below stairs, and saw him march Bessie, in disguise and disgrace, toward her room. Then she was in the corridor; but, knowing instinctively that startling revelations were sure to be made, and jealously anxious to hear them, she tiptoed into Bessie's room and concealed herself under the bed, where she had been discovered because of a sneeze she could not suppress.

She looked tremblingly at Brandon.

"If you'll be kind enough to explain," said Brandon, quivering with rage. "All this is most extraordinary."

A vicious gleam had been in Ina's eyes as she bent them on Bessie; but the gleam faded, to be replaced by a shadow of fear, when she was thus questioned.

What explanation could she make? None; except to make a clean breast of it, as Bessie had done.

"A pretty kettle of fish!" Brandon reiterated, when he heard her through. "Enemies and spies in my own house. My own daughter and niece eavesdropping and deceiving me, and giving assistance to my foes."

"Nothing of the kind!" Ina flashed. "I am as much a hater of that sport as you can be! You'll never find me doing anything to assist him!"

Brandon lifted his eyebrows inquiringly. It suddenly occurred to him that this black-eyed woman, if she really hated the sport, might be made an ally worth having, but Number Two did not then put his thoughts into words.

"Better go to your room," he commanded. "I'll see you again. And, Bessie, for God's sake, get out of them duds as quick as you can!"

Bessie was only too glad to have the interview end in any fashion, and promised immediate obedience.

Nor was Ina anxious that it should be prolonged. She had not come out with flying colors. She felt humiliated and disgraced. Not because she had eavesdropped, but because she had been detected.

CHAPTER XV.

A MURDEROUS ATTEMPT.

Scarcely was Lariat Bill out of sight, gliding after the disguised girl, when a little snaky Mexican slipped out of the shadow of an adobe wall and writhed toward the room of the Spangled Sport.

The little Mexican had not seen the cowboy nor been seen by him.

Each would have acted differently if he had known of the presence and intentions of the other.

This Mexican crept along near the walls, where the gloom was deepest, until he came to the door that gave entrance to the placita, beyond which the sport's room was located.

He gained the placita, where he paused for some time to assure himself that the way before him was clear. Then he hurried through, into the corridor, where the sport's door was to be found.

He had spent so much time, however, in the placita, that he was not permitted to make the cursory examination of the door and the room that he wished to make, but was forced on by sounds of other feet.

These were made by Lariat Bill, who was returning, in much disgust and discomfort, from the Arcade.

There was an empty room beyond, into which the Mexican dived, and, as if the favoring fates were aiding him, it turned out that this room joined the sport's.

He closed the door and crouched in the darkness, while Lariat Bill came on and entered the room of the sport, after a preliminary knock.

The Mexican screwed his ear against the wall and listened, and distinctly heard the strange account which Lariat gave to his chief.

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders, as he caught the words of the sport.

He frowned and muttered maledictions, when he knew that the two were to leave the room and go to the Arcade.

Hal's anxiety was so great that he could not quietly remain in his room, but returned, with the cowboy, to the gaming place and the placita.

But there he heard nothing and saw nothing in which he was greatly interested, except that his peril was hourly increasing.

Many ominous glances were given him, and he and Lariat Bill moved about, with their hands on cocked pistols in their pockets, for it seemed a deadly attack might be made on them at any minute.

But no attack came, and, after a while, the sport went slowly and wearily back to his room in the adobe building.

He undressed and threw himself down on the bed, but for more than an hour sleep did not visit him.

And all the while the little Mexican was lying under the bed with drawn knife, waiting for the coveted moment to strike the Spangled Sport.

But the sport did not dream of danger of that sort; did not think that a game of assassination—at least in that form—was to be attempted.

Finally his measured breathing told the waiting villain that the moment had come for action.

The Mexican moved, and began to crawl from under the bed.

But in that instant Hal awoke—awoke to a full realization of his danger.

Not by the movement of a muscle, however, did he notify the would-be murderer of the fact.

His fingers closed on the revolver which of late he always kept within reach—closed on it so softly that the Greaser knew it not.

Every nerve was strained to the utmost. He felt that he was quivering from head to foot, and his heart-beats sounded, to his excited imagination, like the measured and rapid beats of a drum.

But, in reality, he was as rigid and quiet as if he were carved out of stone.

His eyes pierced the semi-gloom and fell on the head of the Mexican as it was slowly lifted above the level of the bed.

The head rose higher and higher; the eyes gleamed fiendishly; the knife shone with a dull glimmer; then there was a silent movement toward the bed, and the knife was poised for a stroke, but, before it could descend, the revolver spouted its fire almost in his face.

But a quick movement saved the assassin's life, and, with the fury of an enraged leopard, he leaped on the sport.

The latter rolled out of the bed, dropping the revolver. His fingers clutched the Mexican's throat; but the villain again twisted his head aside and escaped the clutch.

Halcyon half got on his feet, and, tearing the knife from the Mexican's grasp, sought to use it on him.

He struck time and again as they struggled and writhed to and fro across the floor, and more than once he was sure that the knife touched the flesh.

Finding he was no match for the young American, the Mexican tore himself out of the sport's hands and bounded away through the corridor, and across the placita to the street.

The sport sank to the floor, almost exhausted and quite faint, now that the stimulus of danger and excitement was removed.

And at that moment, some servants and others came rushing in from below. They had heard the shot and the sounds of the struggle.

Hal, not caring to make a full explanation, turned them away with some flimsy though fairly plausible answers.

He could see, by the moonlight, that there were markings of blood on the floor, and when the curious inquirers were gone

he relighted the lamp and examined the marks.

There were sprinklings of blood and a bloody footprint.

It was clear that the knife had drawn blood, and the stains on the blade appeared to indicate that the injuries given were of a serious character.

But the sport's revolver was gone!

He knew it had fallen to the floor, and he was reasonably certain the Mexican had taken it.

CHAPTER XVI.

RINGED IN BY FOES.

The Spangled Sport was at a loss what to do, and, in his uncertainty, did nothing. He let the bloody markings remain, and took no pains to set the room to rights.

He half expected that some rumor of what had happened would reach the street and the ears of Lariat Bill, and thought it likely the cowboy would be with him in a short time.

But Lariat Bill did not come, and the minutes passed slowly enough.

The sport did not wish to return to bed. He knew he could not sleep. So he paced up and down the short length of the room, wondering who the Mexican was and why he had made the murderous assault.

It seemed very clear that, behind the Greaser, were hidden the leaders and membership of the hooded band.

More than once Halcyon Hal got out of his chair and stepped nervously toward the door, fumbling his hat, and with the intention of descending into the street, but as often he drew back, irresolutely, and re-seated himself.

He did not know what peril lay in wait for him in the street. In his room, with the would-be assassin vanquished, he was reasonably safe, he reckoned, till the coming of day.

How he longed for the coming of Bill Larkins—any friend, in fact, to whom he could speak of his adventure and from whom he might obtain sensible advice.

When more than an hour had gone by, Hal heard the tramping of many feet in the corridor.

There was an ominous suggestion in the heavy tread that beat on the uncarpeted boards like the confusion of thumping drums.

He leaped to his feet, turned the light still higher, and changed its location so that he could see out into the corridor without being himself directly in the full glare of the lamp, and, cocking a revolver, which he held this time in his hand, ready for instant use, he awaited the crisis, as he knew it to be.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

His muscles tightened and his features grew sterner.

He pushed the door wider open that he might look out.

Then he beheld the false Talbott Venor and Bob Brandon and Peg-leg Hamil, and others known to him, followed by a half-score of ruffians of every stripe.

All were armed, but, when the door opened wider, they halted and remained for an instant, standing, in silence, though they fingered their weapons.

Behind them, as if peering covertly over their shoulders, was the keen face of the cowboy, Lariat Bill.

The beleaguered sport could have shouted for joy when he beheld that face.

Lariat Bill winked knowingly, as if commanding caution and quiet.

Brandon shifted nervously, as he called out:

"We have come to arrest you for murder! You might as well surrender, without makin' us any trouble!"

The sport's face perceptibly whitened. He realized that this was a very serious charge, and he could not divine just what lay back of it; and that it would not only be folly, but madness, to offer resistance, he also knew.

The speaking countenance of the cowboy behind the menacing band told him to make no fight.

"If you will explain," he began, "perhaps we may come to an understanding

and avoid trouble! I have done nothing! The accusation, by whoever made, is foul and false!"

"It's just as I say!" Brandon retorted. "You're wanted for murder—for the murder of a Mexican, killed not an hour ago! That don't need any explanation, does it?"

Like a flash came the thought that the Mexican killed was the one who had entered his room; and, also, there came the disturbing recollection that one of his revolvers had been taken by the Mexican. No doubt that revolver had been recognized on the person of the murdered man, whoever he might be.

"We'll see that you have a fair trial," Brandon hastened to assure. "And you'll find it to your best interest to go along with us peaceable."

"You have but to command and I but to obey! I can't do anything else. You hold the whiphand, just now."

"Correct you are," asserted Brandon, pleasantly. "We'll down you where you stand if you don't go. You can't get out of that room."

It began to seem that this was what Brandon hoped for; that he expected the sport to show fight and so give Number Two and his pals good excuse to shoot him.

The cowboy smiled approvingly when the sport came out of his room and gave himself into the hands of his foes.

Though he turned over the weapon he had held—the only heavy revolver that yet remained to him—he did not give up a smaller revolver which was hidden away in an inner pocket.

"How and where and when am I to be tried?" was his anxious inquiry.

"Just as soon as you'll want, and by good men, you bet! We don't send nobody over the long trail down here in old Santa Fe unless we know they're deserving."

The men had crowded about the sport, and he was pushed on in front of them, with a scantiness of courtesy that did not augur well for the future.

But the die had been cast. Whatever the peril, there was now no possibility of retreat. The sport was forced to go on.

He was not bound, a thing for which he was grateful. But he appeared so securely in the possession of his foes that there really seemed no necessity for bonds.

Once on the street, he saw that a great crowd had gathered a little farther down, and that they were gesticulating and talking in the most excited manner.

Toward this crowd he was conducted. Hisses and groans and jeers greeted him, when it was known who he was, and the crowd fell back to allow him to pass.

He was growing more uneasy as to the probable outcome, when he was conducted to the point that seemed the center of interest.

Beneath one of the street lamps, that lighted it gruesomely, lay the body of the little Mexican, who had, so short a time before, sought to kill the sport. At his side was the sport's missing revolver, and in his forehead was an ugly pistol wound.

"Hang him!" came the low and determined exclamation as the sport bent above the Mexican's body.

"Hang him!" was repeated from a dozen throats, and the ominous, threatening growl swelled into an angry roar.

The young Easterner knew that his danger was very great, but it pleased him to note that Lariat Bill was close at his side, though apparently never looking at him.

"We'll give him a fair trial," Brandon announced, with a patronizing air. "We don't hang even murderers in this town without giving 'em a show!"

"Give him a trial!" was echoed and re-echoed.

All the while the sport was vainly trying to determine how the little Mexican had come to his death. Who could have killed him? What was the motive?

The condition of his mind was not such as to induce clear thinking and reasoning, and it is not surprising that he found no adequate answers.

The crowd closed about him, and he was borne toward a house that he knew to hold the office of some representative of the law; and he saw, too, that the body of the Mexican was lifted and carried to the same place.

It was placed before him, on a bench, in the rear of the room—his enemies seeming to think that the dead face would act as an accusing witness to drive him to a confession.

That was not what they thought, though; they felt that that was the best way to arouse indignation of the multitude and make it more certain that Judge Lynch would come forward and close the scene with a dreadful tragedy.

He was speedily given another surprise, when the so-called trial began, which it did, without delay.

A disreputable fellow, who, from his generally unwholesome appearance, seemed little better than a tramp, stepped forward and testified that he had seen the sport rush on the Mexican and had heard the shot.

It was a bold and audacious falsehood; but it was received with many manifestations of approval.

Again that ominous cry swelled into a roar.

"Hang him! Hang him!" came from a score of lips.

The sport really began to think he was lost, for the story he told of the assault of the Mexican, when the latter got the pistol, was hooted and disbelieved.

He kept watching the cowboy and was resolved, if worst came to worst, to make a bolt and fight his way out of the room or fall in the attempt, and was nerving himself for this supreme effort, when—the unexpected happened.

A door behind him opened and a woman stepped to his side, a woman, heavily armed, but undisguised, and that woman was Bessie Brandon!

Her face was more pallid than that of the corpse before them, her eyes scintillated, and her air was feebly rigid, yet firm as steel.

"Take this!" she said, thrusting a cocked revolver into the fingers of the amazed sport. "This outrage shall go no further! I call on all honorable men to see that this foul murder is not done!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BRAVERY OF A WOMAN.

The crowd seemed spellbound. Hardly a man stirred as her clear tones swept through the room. They stared as if unable to credit their senses.

Even Bob Brandon appeared for the moment stupefied.

But he quickly recovered, and then his harsh voice rose:

"Go to your room! Do you hear me? At once!"

He drew a pistol and leveled it at the sport, and his example was about to be imitated by Vennor and those near him, when Bessie placed herself boldly in front of the young man, as if she would intercept the threatened bullets with her own body.

"Back!" she whispered, pushing the sport toward the door, that still remained open. "Now is the time. Don't delay!"

At the same instant Lariat Bill crowded forward and tried to reach her side and stand shoulder to shoulder with her.

The sport was quick to understand her plans, and he dived through the doorway while shielded by her, and gained the open air.

After him came Bessie and the cowboy, though they were no sooner beyond the walls than a shower of bullets flew after them, splintering the timbers of the building, but doing no other damage.

A loud howl went up over this clever rescue—a howl that held anger and threats.

Hal felt that, in rescuing him, the fair woman, whom he so loved, had put her own life in deadliest peril.

"You'd better go now," she said, when they were clear of the building, and while they could hear the baffled mob raging within. "The way is clear, and it may not be in another minute."

"Kerrect," said the cowboy. "I say, slide!"

"But you?" the sport protested, speaking to Bessie.

"Do not trouble about me. I am perfectly safe. My father is the leader of that mob. They won't dare to hurt me!"

"But your father!" the sport exclaimed, recalling the story told him by the cowboy of the anger of her father toward her.

"Go on, and save yourself! If you don't, what I've done will be wasted! Go on! Go on!"

She fairly pushed him from her, with vehement energy.

And, when she saw him hasten away, accompanied by Lariat Bill, she turned with marvelous calmness to face the mob she had defied and enraged.

Yet she did not seem to fear their anger. Her courage seemed to be rising to sublime heights.

Her father was the first to emerge from the house and the first to see her, standing there as if in defiance.

His brow was black with vexation.

"Go to your room, you hussy!" he commanded, with a bulldog fierceness. "I'll settle with you later!"

Almost a look of relief came to her face. Evidently, in spite of her bravery, she had feared something much worse.

As if thinking this a respite not to be abused, she turned about and almost instantly disappeared.

Hardly had she gone, when Lariat Bill came into view and coolly rejoined the mob.

"I say, that there was a gritty thing," he asserted, in a loud voice. "A darnation gritty thing. I don't think in all my experience, I ever saw it's equal!"

His remarks were not greeted hilariously, which seemed to surprise and offend him.

"Gents, if you don't want to 'gree with me, you don't hev to; but you needn't act like you was clams! I went to that gal's side, and I hain't ashamed of it, I hain't! I allow she's a mighty good-lookin' gal to stand up alongside of! An', as for that there sport killin' the Mexican, he never no more done it than I did!"

He glared around, as if he meant to pounce on any one that had the hardihood to differ with him.

"What's become of him?" was the fierce demand.

"If you know, gents, you're ahead of me! I seen him awhile ago, but now I don't see him! That's the whole heft of the matter!"

"You helped him to get away!"

"A thing which I hain't ashamed on, neither. I'd do it ag'in, if I seen the need. He's been a friend to me, an' I don't never go back on a friend! He saved my life onc't, that feller did, and I couldn't call myself a man if I forgot it!"

His words were not without effect. These rough men of the Southwest admired a friendship that knew no shadow of turning. At the same time, they regretted the escape of the sport.

But their glances were kindlier as they hurried by the cowboy in search of the sport.

Lariat Bill joined them, a mysterious smile on his lips.

"I don't allow they'll find him," was his thought; "but, if they do, I'll want to be right close around to chip in ag'in!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPORT SHOWS HIS CLEAR GRIT.

The Spangled Sport did not go far when he escaped from the bloody-minded mob by the aid of Bessie Brandon. A side street, pointed out by the cowboy, received him.

Along this he ran till he came to a disused stable, into which he pushed, and concealed himself under some loose hay.

He remained thus hidden until pretty sure the crowd had vanished from the street, and then he crept out and made his way, with great caution, to the point where he had first seen the little Mexican lying dead.

He was certain the Mexican had been killed by a member of the hooded band; or that, having been found dead, the cir-

cumstance had been seized by these enemies to make a black case against the man whose death they had failed to accomplish.

He thought it barely possible there might be some marks or indications showing just the manner in which the Mexican had met death and revealing the murderer.

There was, fortunately, no one in sight when the sport crept to the point, and he was thus given ample opportunity to look the ground over. However, he found but one thing, apparently of little worth in determining the facts. That one thing was a suspender buckle, holding a torn piece of suspender in its teeth.

He picked it up and glanced at it keenly, giving a start as he did so, and then tucked it into a pocket.

Further search revealed nothing more, and, fearing to be seen there, he retreated to a safer place.

This was an empty square, bounded by mud walls. Here he felt comparatively secure from observation, and, taking out the buckle and the piece of suspender, he struck a match and looked the things over as well as he could.

"The Mexican was shot after a fight! And the shooting was done by Peg-leg Hamil. I have seen this buckle and suspender on him!"

Having no doubt of the correctness of these deductions, he sat down to think over all the occurrences of the past few hours that were calculated to throw light on the mystery.

Why was the Mexican sent to kill him, taking it for granted he was so sent? Why, having failed, was the Mexican killed?

There seemed no question that the Mexican had been chosen by the hooded band to wipe out the sport as a dangerous enemy, and that, having failed, he had fallen into an altercation with Peg-leg Hamil and been slain by him.

Peg-leg belonged to the band. Peg-leg was interested in having the sport put out of the way. Peg-leg must have hated the Mexican because of his failure and brought on a fight, which terminated fatally to the latter.

And then, finding the sport's revolver on the person of the Mexican, with one chamber discharged, he had thought to accuse and convict the sport of the deed, and had brought the band in to back up the scheme.

To the mind of Halcyon Hal all this was as clear as day.

The match had gone out, but the sport held the tell-tale articles in his fingers as he mentally viewed and reviewed the happenings of the night, trying to see them in their proper relations and avoid all error.

The thing to do now, it appeared, was to find Peg-leg. That would be easy, by going to the Arcade, but Halcyon Hal did not want to go to the Arcade just then.

If he could get hold of Hamil, could find him alone and force him to talk on the matter!

He thrust the things into a pocket and strolled toward the street, his movements as cautious as ever.

When he neared the thoroughfare, he heard steps approaching—peculiar hitching, thumping steps, that he knew were Peg-leg's.

He drew in his breath with delight. The thing for which he had hoped seemed about to transpire. Peg-leg Hamil was coming his way, and, apparently, alone.

The sport thrust his head out from behind the wall, as a turtle thrusts its head out of its shell, took a good look, and drew back.

Peg-leg was coming on at a good gait, and unaccompanied.

"If Lariat Bill were only here with his lasso!" the sport thought. "Oh, if I only had one myself!"

The outcome of the fight between Peg-leg and the little Mexican was sufficient to show that the bum was not an easy man to handle.

The sport felt around in the darkness and found a stick.

He crowded close up to the walk, though still concealing himself in the gloom, and held the stick in readiness.

He did not mean to fail; he could not afford to fail.

The bum came on, all unaware of his peril.

When he drew near the dark mouth of the side street, he slowed his pace. The point he was approaching must have been suggestive of evil.

The sport fancied the bum wanted to re-examine the place where the Mexican had been killed. Perhaps he wanted to look for the articles now hidden in one of Halcyon's pockets. Such articles might become very mischievous.

The bum's eyes were fixed on the walk in front of him as he stumped along, and he did not know of the presence of a foe until Hal rushed from the shadow of the wall and struck him a resounding blow with the club.

It fell across the bum's head, and brought him down like a bullock in the shambles.

The sport did not know how serious might be the bum's injury, but he had no time nor inclination to make an examination there.

He picked up the insensible form and pulled it out of the light, and then dragged it back to the spot where the match had been struck for the purpose of examining the buckle and the bit of suspender.

A groan came from the bum's lips, and, when the point had been reached, Halcyon lit another match and flashed its light in the bum's face.

The eyes opened, under the influence of the light, and the bum stared about with returning consciousness.

He recognized the sport, and likewise his surroundings, and seemed almost instantly to comprehend what had befallen him.

A sickly and questioning smile lighted his drink-swollen face, and then the match went out.

"I see you know me," said the sport, leveling a revolver at the bum and clicking the cylinder around in a way to throw a nervous man into spasms. "Of course you've an idea why I dropped you out there and what I want?"

"Hain't the least," Peg-leg responded. "You're ahead of me. If you'll explainify a bit."

"You're a cool one. I s'pose now you'll deny that you killed the Mexican!"

The bum gave an undisguised start. "Of course you'll deny it. I hardly expect you to do otherwise! All the same, permit me to assure you that I know that you killed him!"

"Puttin' it pesky strong, I see!" with an uneasy laugh. "What in tarnation would I want to kill that Mexican for?"

"You tell me!"

"I never killed him! You're away off!"

"Oh, come now," and the sport clicked the cylinder around again. "Tell that to somebody that don't know any better! The proof's dead against you! I found, out there, a little while ago, a piece of suspender and a suspender buckle that came off of you. If you'll examine, you'll see that what I say is true."

"On the whole, I guess you'd better keep your hands where they are," as the bum made a motion to put down his hands. "You may have a pistol there that I overlooked."

"There's no need to argue that you killed the Mexican. I know you did. What I want to know is, why?"

The bum shifted uneasily, and, after making further denials, begged to be permitted to go on his way.

"That Mexican was sent by you and your pals—who were too cowardly or too careful to try it themselves—to kill me. He failed, and afterward, you quarreled with him about that failure, and killed him. What did you do it for? That is, why did you send him to kill me?"

The bum gasped his surprise, and appeared unable to form an adequate reply.

There could be no doubt he was vastly surprised. The comprehensive knowledge of the sport astounded and bewildered him.

"Come, now! I can't afford to fool away time on you! You tell me why you sent him to my room, or take the conse-

quences! You must know, by this time, that I'm a desperate man!"

The bum sank down, cowering, and began to whimper like a whipped spaniel.

He repeated his denials, but, when he saw these were not to be credited, his courage gave way.

"What air you goin' to do with me?" he whined.

"Nothing, if you tell the truth! If you lie to me, I'll kill you!"

The threat was so fiercely uttered that the bum was filled with terror.

He felt certain the sport was saying just what he meant; and, cringing in fear of his life, he blurted out his confession.

"It was to do you up! If he'd 'a' had sand, he'd 'a' done it, too, I don't doubt."

"He tried it, all right," averred the sport, "but he wasn't equal to the occasion!"

The day began to break, redly, and some of its light found its way into the corner where the two crouched. The sport noticed it with a grim smile.

"I s'pose things are just humming over at the Arcade about now," he observed. "Your friends are thick there. You wouldn't mind telling them, now, what you've told me, I presume?"

The scared bum gave a violent start.

"What air you drivin' at?" he sputtered.

"Just what I said! You wouldn't mind, would you? I hope not, for you'll have to do it, whether you mind or not. You've got to go with me to the Arcade and confess that you killed the Mexican, and that you and your pals sent him to my room to kill me!"

The bum was seized with a fit of abject terror. He had never dreamed of such a demand. To do as requested, was, he felt, as much as his life was worth.

"If you don't go, you get this!" said the sport, continuing the bum's line of thought. "You may get out of it there, but you can't get away from this!"

The bum writhed and protested, but the sport was as firm as the everlasting hills, and it ended in the sport driving the cringing scamp before him, at the muzzle of the pistol, and compelling the bum to precede him into the Arcade.

The room was half filled, and the noisy buzz of animated discussion reached them; but this ceased when they made their appearance in the doorway.

It formed a striking tableau, these two, the sport holding the bum in subjection by that drawn pistol, and both momentarily halting in the door.

The sight produced a sensation, and, while several hands involuntarily sought pistol belts, not one was lifted for a shot. The very audacity of the Spangled Sport struck them dumb and silent.

"Here is the murderer of that Mexican!" the sport announced, in so loud a voice that the words were heard all over the room. "He has confessed it to me! And, more, he has confessed that he and his friends sent the Mexican to my room last night to kill me!"

He swept the apartment with his fierce and defiant glances, while holding the bum with the pistol, and his gaze settled for an instant on Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor.

"And those friends," the voice still ringing, "are Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor and their pards! I have the proofs; those proofs are lodged with a friend, and the shot that ends my life is the signal for their production!"

Verily, he was taking the bull by the horns! He had not so lodged any proof, but the bold assertion had a marked and salutary effect.

"I propose to walk openly in this town, when and where I wish, and if the hands of those scoundrels are lifted against me again they must suffer the consequence!"

Having hurled this defiance at his enemies, he backed through the doorway and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SUITOR MADE RIDICULOUS.

The news of what had occurred flew swiftly through the town and evoked much comment. Much of that comment was favorable to Halcyon Hal, for there was no concealment of the fact that the

bum, by withholding his voice, had confessed that the things charged by Halcyon were true. There could be no concealment of it. The whole occurrence had been of too public a character.

Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor felt that they were almost undone. Such a bold counter-stroke had not been on the calendar of expected things.

And, while they were angered at the bum, and inclined to charge him with cowardice, they could not hide from themselves the conviction that they, perhaps, would have done likewise under similar circumstances. Life was dear even to a whisky-soaked bum.

One step suggested itself, which was followed at once. They denied bitterly the things charged, and had Peg-leg make a similar denial.

Peg-leg told his cronies, and, in fact, every one with whom he came in contact, that the whole thing was a lie, to which fear had forced him to make seeming assent.

But Peg-leg's manner contradicted his words, even while he was uttering them.

Throughout the day affairs were in statu quo. The sport was not to be seen. And, while Bob Brandon's friends and the friends of Talbott Vennor sought to again fire the Santa Fe heart against the sport, these worthies themselves discreetly kept out of sight.

But Lariat Bill was everywhere. No peril could daunt him, no fear cause him to quail. He asserted and reasserted his positive conviction of the innocence of his friend, the Spangled Sport, and denounced with fierce energy and passion Hal's enemies.

Such a friend, at such a time, was invaluable, and Lariat Bill's words and declarations stemmed the tide that might otherwise have set in against the sport.

But, though Brandon and Vennor remained out of sight the greater portion of the day, they were not silent or idle.

Brandon had a wordy war with Bessie, in which he could not claim that he came off victor, and Vennor, as night came on, decided that he, too, must have an interview with that courageous and energetic young woman.

According to his plans, and the plans of her father, Miss Bessie Brandon was to become his wife in due time.

Miss Bessie had never herself said so, but it was not thought absolutely necessary that her wishes in the matter should be consulted.

Bob Brandon was accustomed to having his own way in his own family, and would have been the last man to concede that he was not to have his way in this thing.

More than once had Vennor approached the handsome young woman on the subject, and, while he had not been absolutely repulsed, he felt that he had not been encouraged.

Now he proposed to try again. It was high time something should be done, otherwise he might expect to see her elope with the dashing sport from under his very nose some of those moonlight nights.

Vennor was not in the most sanguine of moods as he approached Bessie that evening.

She was in the big sitting room, and he came into her presence rather awkwardly and distraught.

Ordinarily Talbott Vennor was not a bashful man. But now he was strangely diffident.

No doubt all this was because he felt convicted of a crime, in her eyes.

She hardly looked at him as he entered, and made no motion to put away his hat, which he deposited on the floor.

Recent occurrences made Vennor think that Bessie had fallen in love with the sport. On no other ground could he account for her actions. Once, in man's clothing, she had warned the sport of peril—peril from her own father and his friends; and once, in her own proper person, had she boldly rescued the sport from his foes, when it seemed he could be saved in no better way. Did not all this mean something?

Did it not mean that she had fallen in

love with the handsome sport? It seemed to Talbott Vennor that there was no other reasonable inference.

Yet he was loth to accept this conclusion. He would not accept it as final until he heard it from her lips.

"You're not in a pleasant temper this evening," he ventured, hitching his chair near her's. "I hope you're not offended at me?"

She was silent for a moment, as if intending to pass his words unnoticed, then she spoke.

"I don't see why my mood should concern you, Mr. Vennor! And as for being pleased with your performances, I don't see how you can expect that. I'm not supposed to do impossible things."

"Now, I know you're offended! I often do things that are not right, I grant! Every one does!"

"Every one is not a murderer in his heart!" she flung at him.

"Nor am I! That sport—I presume you refer to that affair—killed a man in cold blood. We meant to give him a fair trial, and punish him only if he was guilty! What's wrong about that?"

"Nothing, if you spoke the truth! But you're lying to me!"

He bit his lip and his face reddened.

"Rather strong words from the woman I expect to marry!"

"You may expect what you please, but I don't expect it! The arrangements you make with my father have no binding force with me."

"You are inclined to be cruel to me to-night!" drawing still nearer to her. "You do not forget what I told you the other evening?"

He paused for reply, and, when none came, went on:

"I told you then that I wanted to marry you because I loved you! For that reason only! I love you as much now as then! Whatever you may say can't alter that fact or make me love you less!"

"It's a mere waste of time and sentiment," she said, with chilling indifference. "I told you as much before."

Talbott Vennor was really much taken with the beauty of this young woman. He never had seen a fairer. He wanted to make her his wife.

It cut him to be spoken to in that manner.

He reached over and strove to take her hand.

She drew it away.

"If you trouble me, I shall leave the room!"

"Don't do that!" he pleaded, flinging himself on his knees before her, in true lover fashion. "You must not do that! You must hear what I have to say!"

She got on her feet, in some haste, and with much scorn.

Vennor's attitude was most unfortunate, for Bob Brandon's pet dog—a small and mischievous creature—caught sight of him and made a dive for his legs.

Probably the dog felt called on to defend Miss Bessie Brandon; at any rate, it sank its sharp teeth into the calf of one of Vennor's legs, bringing a howl from him.

Vennor scrambled to his feet, covered with confusion, and kicked the dog savagely aside.

"You little villain!" he muttered.

Then turned to address Bessie.

She was gone, having fled from the room, with her handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, and convulsed with laughter.

Her unwelcome suitor was beaten and humiliated, and she felt that he was not likely to bother her further that evening with his attentions.

CHAPTER XX.

THROWN OFF THE SCENT.

In spite of the danger attending his efforts, the Spangled Sport was unable to leave off his search for his father.

Having braved the hooded band, he thought it the part of wisdom to continue to do so.

Hence, on the afternoon following his narrow escape from death, he appeared openly in the streets, and went from

point to point, talking and conferring with those who were inclined to favor him.

Several arrests had been made of parties, who, it seemed possible, might know something of the death of the Mexican, but there was not much energy in these efforts. The little Mexican was a stranger, and friendless. Human life was held very cheaply in the Southwest at that time, and it was not likely that any sincere attempt would be made to ferret out the real murderer.

Brandon and his pals, having failed to bring about the lynching of the sport, had withdrawn their hands from the matter to all outward appearances.

Toward himself Hal found a marked change in the sentiment of the town. It was not generally believed, now, that he had had anything to do with the murder.

Probably it would have been possible for him, backed by Lariat Bill, to have caused the arrest and trial of Peg-leg Hamil, but he did not consider the game worth the candle, inasmuch as he had other things demanding his time and attention.

He knew his danger was constant, but no hand was lifted against him that night nor the following one.

He wanted to again see Bessie, but he did not think it the part of wisdom to call on her.

So the hours passed, with the danger apparently decreasing, but without witnessing the fulfillment of any of the sport's hopes.

However, on the second night, Lariat Bill, whose vigilance was sleepless, struck what he knew to be an important trail.

He caught a glimpse of the Pueblo, Juan Tinto, sneaking from the vicinity of the Arcade, out toward the hills.

Whether or not Tinto had come to demand money, the cowboy did not know. Nor did it much matter. Tinto knew where the real Talbott Vennor was held, or was supposed to know, and that was the thing of most importance just then.

Immediately Lariat Bill began a pursuit that carried him speedily beyond the limits of the town.

He would have acquainted the sport with this discovery and his intentions had it been possible, but he was forced to move after the Pueblo at once or risk losing him altogether.

Lariat Bill was a much better traller than Brandon. Bill knew all the tricks of trailing as well as any Apache. He had been in the wild Southwest almost from boyhood, and there was little that any borderman could have shown him, in his peculiar line.

So that Juan Tinto had after him a man who could not be duped or thrown out easily in his reckoning.

But Tinto did not know it. Tinto took his usual precautions, but they did not for an instant baffle the bloodhound that was now on the scent. They would have baffled many another man, but not Bill Larkins.

If Tinto had had any cause whatever to suspect that so capable a pursuer was following him, he would, in all probability, have been filled with terror.

The Pueblo slipped on through the night across the sandy hills amid the cedars and the pinones, and at his heels clung Lariat Bill, as pertinaciously as the Pueblo's own shadow.

On and on for miles and miles, the Pueblo losing his caution by degrees, as Santa Fe was left behind.

It was not the cowboy's desire to bring on a conflict or to rope the Indian in the hope of gaining information, but rather to so pursue Tinto that the information would necessarily be revealed.

"Hanged if he hain't goin' straight to the pueblo of Juarez!" the cowboy grunted, when Tinto finally changed his course and headed away in a familiar direction. "I've more'n once thought he belonged there, mebber!"

The cowboy was somewhat acquainted with the pueblo of Juarez. He had been there. He even knew two or three of its people.

"If that's his place, I'll find out about

the whole thing 'fore mornin'," was his avowment.

There could be no doubt, a half-hour later, that Juarez was the point aimed at by Tinto.

Finally the pueblo was gained. Tinto disappeared in the shadows of its houses and the cowboy squatted outside to think what he ought to do.

"Guess I'll go into the old graveyard myself," he eventually declared. "I've got to find out, 'fore day comes."

Having reached this decision he advanced to the houses, and then made his way stealthily among them till he came to one that had a familiar look.

It was a low, adobe structure, with the flat mud roof and absence of windows peculiar to these houses.

The cowboy hesitated for some time, looking anxiously about, and then tapped softly on the heavy wooden door.

He repeated the taps and there was a stir within.

An Indian voice was raised in cautious inquiry, and then the door opened a crack and an Indian head appeared.

"It's me," said the cowboy, with a feeling of relief. "I see you're at home! Was afraid mebbe you wouldn't be! I reckon I kin come in!"

The door was pushed farther open, and when the cowboy had squeezed through, it was closed and barred.

A grease lamp was lighted and stuck in a hole in the wall.

Its light, poor as it was, revealed the interior of the building.

"Glad to find you at home, Pablo," the cowboy declared, squatting on the mud floor. "Don't let me bother your folks! I just want to ask you a few questions and then I'll be off."

About the walls were several rude bunks of sheepskins, and from these the heads of children peeped.

The place was almost bare of other furniture. The absence of a window made it impossible for the light to be seen by any one without.

"My friend comes late?" said Pablo, inquiringly. "But he is always welcome!"

"Thankee!" said Larkins, picking a bit of wood from the floor and beginning to whittle it with his knife. "Juan Tinto comes and goes late!"

"You have seen him?" inquired the Pueblo, in surprise.

"Followed him here from Santa Fe this night."

The Pueblo veiled his eyes with his black lashes.

"Why does he go to Santa Fe?" asked Larkins, cautiously.

"To buy meal! Or, perhaps, blankets! How should I know?"

"You are my friend, Pablo. You know I am your friend. I've helped you more than once. I saved your boy that time from the mountain lion."

Pablo did not reply, except to nod his head.

"If I ask you a question, then, you'll answer it straight, won't you?"

"Pablo does not forget to help his friends."

"Is there a white man in this village?"

He looked straight at Pablo as he asked this, but the Pueblo's eyes were still veiled by those long, black lashes.

Pablo answered so quickly and so positively that it did not seem possible he could be uttering a falsehood.

"There is no white man here! Why do you ask that?"

Larkins' hopes were dashed. He had begun to believe—was almost sure—that Talbott Vennor was in this village.

"You're certain of that?"

"Very sure! You are the only white man here! If you mean that—"

"I didn't mean me! Another white man; an oldish man, who calls himself Talbott Vennor!"

"He is not here! Why should he be here?"

"He is in some village and he is a prisoner, and I thought it might be in this!"

"Oh, it is that man you mean!" cried Pablo. "He was here, yes! But he is here no longer!"

"Tell me about him," the cowboy urged, not able to hide his eagerness.

He saw that there was a change in the Indian's manner, and began to hope that he was now to learn the long-sought secret.

"He was not right here!" and Pablo significantly tapped his forehead. "He was controlled by the spirits. He wandered where he would, and at last he wandered away and did not come back!"

"Where did he go to?"

"Ask them that knows. I cannot tell you."

"You haven't any idea at all?"

"I do not know where he is!"

"How long ago was it that he went away?"

"I do not know. Not long. He was here a good while. I did not know it was him you asked for."

"You air tellin' me the truth, Pablo? You would not speak to me with the crooked tongue?"

"I tell you the white man with the crazy head is gone," Pablo declared, with much impatience. "Is not the word of a Pueblo good?"

A great discouragement weighed down the cowboy's heart.

Yet, if he had but known it, at that moment, the real Talbott Vennor was sleeping in his mud prison, not a dozen yards away, and Pablo knew it.

But Pablo was too good a Pueblo to impart this information, even to the friend who had saved the life of his son.

Pablo knew all about the imprisonment of Vennor, for Pablo had been one of the half-naked band into whose midst Vennor had tumbled on that ill-fated night.

And Pablo knew, too, as did all the Pueblos of Juarez, that Juan Tinto had tried to sell this information to the young sport at Santa Fe, and to the gamblers of the Arcade.

The information had seemed to reach them almost on the wings of the wind, so rapidly had it come. But it was reliable information, and Juan Tinto was now in disgrace because of it.

He was not only in disgrace, but in great peril of his life, and he had been deposed from his position of governor and upbraided in the council house for his duplicity and unfaithfulness.

He was closely watched, too, so that it was certain he had not visited the Arcade or its vicinity that evening for the purpose of selling any information.

But all this was a sealed book to Bill Larkins, and he listened to Pablo's statements with much disappointment.

It was too bad, he thought, after all his caution and his wearisome trailing of Tinto.

He continued to talk, and to shape his questions in ingenious ways, but to all Pablo gave similar replies, so that, after a while, he was thoroughly convinced that Pablo had told the truth and the whole truth.

"How many days ago was it that he went away, Pablo?"

"Not a week," said Pablo.

"And you hain't any notion of where he's gone?"

"Maybe the wolves picked his bones!" shrugging his shoulders. "There is no food in the hills where he went that he could get. And I heard the wolves howling a great deal in those days. Yes, I think the wolves must have got him. He would be weak, and could not fight them."

Glibly did Pablo spin out these falsehoods.

"Well, I don't want you to tell anybody I've been hyer," the cowboy cautioned. "Not Juan Tinto, for one. Tinto is no friend of mine."

"Tinto shall know nothing."

"Thank you, Pablo. I knowed I could trust you! You're an honest Injun, you air, and I'm proud to know you."

Pablo smiled in his crafty, mysterious way.

"Pablo is glad of the friendship of the white man."

"Well, I'm your friend. You may count on it. And, now, I'm going. Sorry to have bothered you so. Keep mum, please, 'bout my bein' hyer."

Pablo loosed the bar of the door, and the

cowboy slipped out into the night and away from the pueblo of Juarez, and away from the prisoner who needed his aid.

It was a sad error, this putting of such implicit confidence in the words of the Pueblo.

And the Pueblo's story was what he carried back to Halcyon Hall.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BIT OF MYSTERY.

It was but natural that the heroism of Bessie Brandon in his behalf should have increased the sport's love of her and multiplied his anxieties concerning her.

And, while he filled in much of his time with searching for his father, it is certain that his thoughts were very much given to the charming young woman who had gained his affections.

He knew instinctively that a bitter quarrel between father and daughter had followed her efforts in his behalf, and he would have sacrificed a great deal to have known the outcome of that quarrel.

He feared that she had been subjected to bodily abuse.

Still, as no rumor of anything of the kind reached him, he hoped his fears were groundless.

However, his fears on the subject made him unusually courageous in his visits to the Arcade. A half-dozen times, on the second day after his rescue, he invaded the placita, thinking to find Bessie there and gain a few words with her.

Each time he was doomed to disappointment. He saw neither her nor Ina, nor any one whom he cared to question about her.

His efforts did not cease with these visits to the Arcade. He haunted the vicinity of the gaming rooms at unseemly and perilous hours, and, more than once, in the gray of the early morning, stood in the shadows of the adjacent narrow streets, looking up at the house that he felt held the woman he loved.

It seemed a foolish sort of passion that would drive a young man to such acts of apparent folly.

Yet, as it turned out, he believed himself fully justified.

Standing thus, during the darkness closely following the midnight hour, he heard the scream of a woman whom he knew to be Bessie. There could be no doubt on the subject, he was sure, for he could not fail to recognize her voice under any circumstances.

Twice the scream came; then all grew ominously silent.

He believed the sounds descended from her room.

He was wildly anxious for her safety, yet what could he do? He dared not invade the building on such a pretext.

He waited a little while, then heard words coming from the room from which had issued the scream. The words were spoken by Bob Brandon.

He could not comprehend them, but the tone was murderous, and chilled him.

He wondered if Bessie's father could have been guilty of any bloody deed to silence her. Brandon had found it impossible to control her, and may have resorted to stern measures. Thus the sport felt.

He was almost on the point of running into the placita and bounding up the stairway to investigate.

But no further sounds came.

There was the flashing of a light, which died away, and that was all.

Hour after hour the sport watched and waited, gnawed by the most unceasing anxiety.

The gray dawn and the bright day found him in the same place. But he learned no more. The room was silent—seemingly deserted.

When certain he could learn nothing he crept away to his room, white and haggard.

Lariat Bill had already made his report concerning his night visit to the pueblo of Juarez, and Lariat was waiting for the sport in the latter's room.

He noted the pallor and nervousness written on Halcyon's features.

"What's up?" he demanded.

The sport gave a hurried account of what he had heard and seen during the night.

The cowboy became grave.

"What do you think of it?" Lariat asked.

"That's what I'd like you to say."

"Hain't the least idea."

The sport put his hands behind him and paced up and down the room. His brows were knit, and he was trying earnestly to solve the problem presented by the events of the night.

He could make nothing of it. He was in no mood for sleep, and, as the cowboy was unable to shed any light on the mystery, the sport left the room soon afterward, and went again to the Arcade.

He was blackly frowned on by the barkeeper as he entered, but he cared nothing for that.

Not many were present. Only a few all-night men, and these were making ready to leave.

One of them shot him a quick and suspicious glance.

"I heard you had skipped out," he averred.

"Why should I skip?" queried Halcyon.

"It was an elopement, as I heard it. You and Miss Bessie. I've heard your names coupled a good deal, lately, and so was prepared to believe the report!"

The sport eyed the gamester critically.

"Well, you may say there is nothing in it!"

With this he went on toward the plaza, and soon had the pleasure of seeing Ina Brandon advancing in his direction.

She seemed gratified at beholding him.

"Just the man I was looking for," and she smiled and showed her fine teeth. "Here's a note for you! Bessie has gone, you know!"

Trained as he was, the sport could not conceal his surprise and agitation.

He snatched the note and tore it open and read it in her presence.

It was, or purported to be, from Bessie Brandon, and it informed him that she had been called suddenly east, and had departed on the outgoing stage of the previous day.

"I wanted to give that to you yesterday," said Ina, eyeing him covertly. "But I did not get the opportunity!"

The sport recalled the scream he had heard in the night—a scream that he was sure came from the lips of Bessie Brandon, and read the note over and over.

Here was a mystery he could not fathom.

He was sure Bessie had not gone away in the stage of the previous day, for she had been in her room many hours after the stage's departure.

What did it all mean?

He glanced up and caught the questioning look that was in Ina's dark eyes. It struck him strangely and disagreeably. What secret did it hint of?

But, though he was racked with suspicions, he knew it was not wise to voice them.

"Very much obliged," he said, with assumed quietness. "I am only sorry I did not get to see her before she left. When will she likely return?"

"That I can't say! She may be away all summer!"

He could find no further words, and, fearing his manners would excite her attention, he turned from Ina, still holding the letter in his fingers, and walked back into the gaming rooms.

He did not stop there, but hurried home, and laid the matter before the cowboy.

"I've never seen Bessie's handwriting," he declared. "That may be her's, and it may not, you see! I can't imagine what she should write such a thing for, if she did not mean to go away. And I'm sure she did not go away yesterday!"

"Looks like dirt!" averred the cowboy, with an earnest wag of the head.

"I believe there's been murder done!" declared the sport, sinking into a chair.

The cowboy saw that he was very white and trembled violently.

"That's what I believe! She never wrote that letter. She's been killed or run out of the country because of her kindness to me, and Ina Brandon knows all about it!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"CAN YOU FOLLOW THIS TRAIL?"

"There it is!"

Lariat Bill stopped and pointed to some almost invisible marks.

"It'll get plainer funder on. Hyer, the ground's hard. In the sand, the tracks'll show up better!"

He spoke to the Spangled Sport, who now bent over the marks and carefully examined them.

"I can't make anything of it!" he cried.

They were beyond the limits of the town and out of sight of any one who might be looking from the hills about it.

"Marks of several horses," said the cowboy, quietly, "and one on 'em was carryin' double! Either that or heavy loaded. You see how the hoofs cut in?"

"No, I don't see it, but I'll take your word for it!"

Lariat Bill glanced at him, wonderingly.

"Never knowed you was blind afore!"

An unexpected piece of information had drawn them to that point.

One of Lariat's old pards, who knew something of the work in which Lariat was engaged, had brought him the information.

This pard of the cowboy had been passed in the hills shortly before day-break on the night that held so much of mystery by a company of masked men, bearing in their midst a woman.

This woman was veiled and bound and borne on a pony by one of the men.

The cowboy had concealed himself when he heard the horses approaching, and had been very close to the strange party.

He had wondered about it, and, when told by Lariat of the suspicions of the Spangled Sport, had related his story as a possible solution of the mystery.

Naturally, Bill Larkins had hurried with the news to Halcyon Hal, and, as naturally, Halcyon Hal had not rested until the work of following up this clew had commenced.

His excitement had never been greater; but now it seemed outweighed by his anxious fears, as he stared down on the dim trail.

"I suppose I am pretty blind, when it comes to things of this kind," he confessed.

"Plain enough to anybody, that ought to be!"

"And your idea is?"

"That the double burden was Bessie and some one who was holdin' her!"

The sport could have hugged the ungainly cowboy, so great was his delight.

"Hain't we better go right on? Maybe we can overtake them! Can you follow this trail?"

"Kin I foller my nose? But I don't think we'd best put right out after 'em! Better git back to town and find out who's gone from it 'sides the girl! We'll know better who to look for and what to do. Then we kin be more sure that we're makin' no mistake!"

Hal saw the wisdom of this and agreed to it, though he was wildly anxious to continue the work so successfully begun.

They hurried back to the town. No one had been aware of their absence. No one seemed to have any idea of the work on which they had engaged.

Of course, the sport gravitated at once to the Arcade. He wanted to know who were the men seen bearing the woman through the hills. Were they Bob Brandon and Vennor?

Going up to the barkeeper he boldly inquired for Vennor, saying he desired a few words of conversation with him.

The barkeeper looked askance and seemed at first inclined to evade a direct reply.

"He's out of town. I've been told! Anything I can do for you?"

"Could you get a message to him?"

"I could take it and try. I wasn't told his address, but I'll know to-morrow, I think, and can then send any word you want sent."

"And Bob Brandon?" the sport asked.

"Don't know anything about Brandon! Maybe he's up-stairs!"

Hal knew well enough in his own mind that Brandon was not up-stairs, or, that if he were, it was because he had but recently returned.

The trail was opening out in fine style. Brandon and Vennor, according to his calculations, were of the band who were escorting the captive woman through the hills, and that captive woman was Bessie Brandon.

The sport could hardly conceal from the barkeeper the joy that filled him on making this discovery.

He did not discontinue his inquiries and searchings until there could be no longer any doubt that the false Talbott Vennor and Bob Brandon were absent from the town.

He discovered, too, that other men were gone. Peg-leg Hamil was nowhere to be seen!

"We must pick up that trail and follow it as fast as we can," was his conclusion, as he hastened toward his room, where he expected to compare notes with Lariat Bill.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LARIAT BILL AS A LOVER.

"I reckon, now, you'd best come and marry me, fer I calculate it hain't a healthy place hyar fer women."

So spoke Lariat Bill leaning toward Susan Crabtree.

It was not the first time the cowboy had expressed similar convictions. Susan Crabtree was not a handsome woman, yet she was a woman pleasant to look on, and, in many ways, attractive.

Bill Larkins thought her very prepossessing as he leaned forward and gave expression to the sentiment quoted above.

Susan flushed under the words, somewhat increasing her good looks thereby.

"Why ain't it a healthy place?" she questioned, ignoring the first part of his statement.

"I 'low you could guess!" asserted Lariat, leaning still nearer.

"I never was good at guessing; so, if you want me to understand you'd better speak out plain."

Still there was in her face, and especially in her eyes, something that told she could have guessed with considerable accuracy.

"Seems to me like women's disappearin' from this hyer place mighty lively," the cowboy averred, with an owlish wink. "Not so very long ago there was three on 'em in this house, to my certain knowledge, and now there ain't but one, which is you."

"Bessie went East, you know," she said, glancing about as if she feared she might be overheard. "But, I declare to you, I don't know what has become of Ina."

"Flew away! Disappeared! Gone up the spout! Somethin' of that kind, I calculate; and that's why I said you'd best marry me and come away from hyer. Next thing, you'll be in the list of the missin'."

They were in the little parlor above stairs, where they had met by seeming accident. Susan had been dusting some furniture, and she now renewed her task with great vigor.

"I hain't no great shakes fer beauty," the cowboy continued, with much earnestness, taking the dust broom from her hands. "But handsome is as handsome does! I 'low I could make a woman of jist about your size as happy as an angel. 'Twould make me as happy as an angel, anyhow, if you'd on'y say yes; and I'd promise to do the best I knowed how."

He had got hold of Susan's hand and was drawing it toward him, while she was making spasmodic and ineffectual attempts to escape.

She did not try very hard, however, and

the strength of the cowboy soon overcame her somewhat weak resistance.

"You'll say that you love me, Susan?" he panted, trembling with joy, for the awkward fellow knew quite as well as if the same had been put in words that Susan Crabtree loved him.

Susan Crabtree confessed as much a minute later, and, when he drew her to him, folded her in his arms and kissed her tired face, asking her if she would not marry him, she told him yes.

It had been a long time since Susan had had a lover, but her heart had not congealed, nor had her affections become soured.

"I oughtn't to stay here talkin' this way," Lariat Bill apologized, some minutes afterward. "But I plum clean forgot what I come to this house fer. I come to see about them two women, Ina and Bessie. But, seein' you, I went straight off to talkin' about somethin' else."

"An' I'm not sorry fer it, either!" he exclaimed, proudly and triumphantly. "I've been wantin' to say what I've just now said fer a good while, and didn't never seem to have the sand. Now I've said it and I'm as happy as a boy with new boots."

Though he felt that he ought to be making further inquiries about the missing women, he continued to play the lover to Susan Crabtree, and to discourse airy nothings and nonsense, and together they laughed and joked and were happy—as happy as if twenty years younger.

Finally Lariat came out of cloudland and recurred to the subject which had brought him there. In whispered tones he told her of the story of his cowboy friend, and of the trail that was to be seen on the sand ridges out beyond the town.

"I don't doubt that Bob Brandon is mean enough to do all that you say," Susan admitted, sinking her voice to a whisper, and glancing cautiously around. "There's a good many things about this house that hasn't been goin' to suit me. I didn't like the place from the first, but it was offered me, and I had to work somewhere!"

"Then you don't know anything about the matter?" Lariat anxiously questioned.

"I know that Mr. Brandon and Bessie had some lively rows not long ago; and I know that he threatened her; and I know, too, that Ina hated her like poison. Nobody didn't need to tell me that last, fer Ina's looks showed it plain."

Bill Larkins nodded, though he had been satisfied of these things before.

"If it was any woman from this house, though, that your friend saw with them men, I'm inclined to believe it was Ina," she asserted. "Now, if you ask me why, I'll tell you I don't know."

Lariat Bill was about to reply, but, instead, darted from her side and thrust his head through the doorway.

A movement, not heard by Susan Crabtree, had been caught by his keen ear, and now, as he thrust out his head, he saw Ina Brandon—the very woman of whom they were talking—emerge from the adjoining room and scud, in her stockinged feet, down the corridor.

It was plain to Lariat that she had overheard every word of their conversation—their love talk and all.

It was plain, too, that she knew she had been discovered, for she looked quickly about before she disappeared from view, and beheld the cowboy.

There was nothing to be gained by pursuing her, and Lariat Bill, much chagrined, drew back into the room and addressed Miss Crabtree.

"The cat's out of the bag now! That witch has been hearing everything we said. You see she wasn't gone, as you thought. It wasn't her that them men had! And, now she'll go straight and tell everything to Bob Brandon and that fellow that calls hisself Talbott Vennor!"

He was angered and humiliated. He, who had always prided himself on his keenness, had been overreached by this woman.

But there was no help for it now. If he had been indiscreet in his words, he would

be taught a lesson, if nothing more. As for what he had said to Susan Crabtree, he would not have recalled a word of that if he could.

Miss Crabtree was almost panic-stricken. She had good reason to fear the wrath of the Brandons. Her indiscretion might cost her her place.

The cowboy read her thoughts and tried to comfort her.

"That's all right. If you lose this home, here's one that'll be only too glad to give you another, where, 'stid o' workin' fer a whole raft o' people that don't care nothin' fer you, you'll be workin' fer jist you and me!"

It seemed a consummation devoutly to be wished, and the cowboy grew almost enthusiastic over the picture of domestic happiness that he hastened to draw.

Yet he knew that he ought not to tarry, even though talk of this kind was such a pleasure. He felt sure that Ina Brandon was not letting any grass grow under her feet. He, too, ought to be away from there; ought to be back in the room of the sport, detailing what had been learned.

"It wasn't Ina, you see; so it must have been Bessie!" he avowed, making up his mind that he must depart. "I can't make it out any other way. It was Bessie Brandon that them scoundrels had with 'em, tied up in that style."

Then he kissed Miss Crabtree again, very loudly and very boldly, and hurried away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE BARRANCAS MINE.

What had been the fate of Bessie Brandon?

In a disused portion of the Barrancas Mine she sat, on that same morning, staring before her with eyes that rained tears and saw almost nothing.

The irregular apartment had been made into a cozy nest, as it seemed, for her. There were indications, however, that it had been occupied before. Skins covered the floor and walls; there were a comfortable cot and chairs, a number of books and some late papers on a swinging shelf, and even a mirror, in which she might behold her woe-begone reflection.

She was not treated cruelly or illy, though she was made to know that she was a prisoner.

And how had she come there?

Her mind flew back on the wings of memory to the Arcade, and to her room above it.

She recalled how, being unable to sleep, she had sat up hour after hour, and how, when the night was far advanced, a rough hand had thrown open the door and a hooded figure had appeared before her.

She had screamed out in fright, and had then lost consciousness.

She knew nothing of what occurred after that until she came to herself, far in the hills, through which she was being swung on the back of a horse.

She recalled, with a shudder, the embrace of the man who held her, and whose arms closed more firmly about her when she came back to a sense of her position.

His had been a strange voice, one she had never before heard, and, though she soon grew conscious of the fact that a band of horsemen surrounded her, she had not been able to see their faces, for their faces had been hooded, like her captor's.

She had asked some questions, and made some hysterical demands; then, relapsing into silence, she had been borne on and on, she knew not whither.

Then this place was reached, which was now her home and her prison.

She had wept and prayed for her freedom, but her hooded captors had been as stolid and heartless as the rocks.

They would not even tell her where she was.

When the rain of tears stopped, she began to look about her, as she had already more than once done.

She did not dream that her father was concerned in her capture and imprisonment. She pictured him as engaging in a bewildered and hasty search, and she even

dreamed that he might find her there and rescue her.

Truth compels the statement, though, that she thought oftener of the Spangled Sport than she did of her father. She did not try to conceal from herself that she loved this man who had so recently been all unknown to her.

She could not regret the efforts she had made in his behalf. She could not feel that they were unwomanly. His life had been in great peril, and she had saved it. Why should not one human creature delight in saving the life of another?

She wondered what he was doing, and whether he had missed her from Santa Fe, and what he would do when he did miss her from the town. Would he endeavor to discover her whereabouts?

She got up from her rug-lined chair and began an examination of her prison, of its walls and the entrance.

This last was a large rock opening, into which a rock door had been cleverly fitted. It seemed the only way by which egress from the place could be had.

She picked up the lamp which gave light to the place, and, holding it high above her head, carefully scanned the walls, pulling the furs and skins aside, that she might make the examination more complete.

She was interrupted by a noise at the entrance.

The door swung slowly on its heavy hinges and a man appeared bearing a tray, on which was a substantial meal.

It was plain that her captors did not mean to starve her. The food was abundant and well cooked.

The man put the tray down and stared at her through the holes in his mask. His eyes held a burning light that made her shudder.

"Will you tell me where I am?" she ventured, controlling her fear and disgust.

"In New Mexico," he said, mumbling his words as if he feared his voice would betray his identity.

"You are very indefinite!" with a toss of her shapely head. "I could have guessed as much! Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me why I'm kept here?"

"Better eat yer grub and not bother 'bout sich things!" he declared. "'Tain't everbody in this world that has all they wants to eat, and them that has ort to be happy."

"Thank you! I'll not starve if you continue to bring me as good! But I want to talk, now! See this?"

She took from her bosom a handsome gold watch, and held it up for his inspection.

"See this? It's pure gold! I'll give it to you if you'll tell me where I am and why I was brought here."

She could see that his eyes sparkled greedily. The temptation was strong on him to take it, but it was not so clear that he desired to pay for the watch with the information requested.

No doubt Bessie Brandon was doing a foolish thing in presenting so alluring an article before the covetous gaze of this conscienceless scoundrel, but the fear of his comrades and leaders made him refuse the offer.

"I daren't!" he protested. "It's a mighty purty watch ye got, an' I'd like to have it, but I daren't."

"They needn't know!" she persisted.

"But if they should? No, no! I daren't."

He put up his hands, as if to bar out the vision.

"Better eat what I brought ye! Er, if ye like better, I'll leave the waiter and come for it at the nex' meal!"

Then, evidently fearing her powers of persuasion, he retreated, securely closing and barring the door after him.

She could not eat at first, but, after a while, she attacked the meal with considerable relish.

She had hardly finished it when the door swung open again.

She leaped up with a cry of delight. The man standing in the doorway was Bob Brandon.

"Oh, father!" she exclaimed, bounding toward him. "You have come to take me away from here! How did you find me? And aren't you afraid you'll be seen?"

His manner chilled her. He was not the smiling, exultant father that she felt he ought to be under the circumstances.

She drew back and he banged to the rock door behind him; then he advanced, without a reply.

He seated himself in the rug-lined chair which she had vacated.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought you was, Bessie," he declared, with indifference.

"Oh, you—you do not mean—"

"I mean that you hain't any more sense than a gopher! I thought, of course, that you'd know I had you brought here, and I thought you'd know why."

Her eyes were wide with fright and astonishment.

"Do you think I was going to let you stay in Santa Fe and thwart me at every turn? Not much! I may be a fool, but I'm not that kind of a fool!"

She seemed on the point of reeling to the earth, but she controlled the feelings of faintness that overpowered her and sank to a seat on a stone.

"Say that again," she implored. "So that I may know you said it!"

He repeated his words, with some variation, so that she could no longer deceive herself.

He had caused her abduction and imprisonment, and it was his power that now held her a captive.

She felt that she could never again trust or believe—not to say love—such a father.

Her face told him as much.

"A deuced pity that I had it to do," looking at her with unparental sternness. "But you can see how it was yourself! You flew in, several times, and knocked all the fat in the fire for me; and I wasn't going to have it happen again."

He seemed to think it best to make a plain, blunt statement.

"What you did was very unwomanly! I never dreamed you could so lower yourself! You advertised to the whole of Santa Fe the fact that you were dead in love with that sport! Everybody talked of it and wondered why you did it!"

She had feared as much. She had told herself time and again, in answer to her inward questionings, that the acts she had performed were not unwomanly; she had sought to draw comfort from these assurances, given by herself to herself.

Now her father was telling her that the whole town had discussed her actions in an unfavorable way.

It was a blow that she felt.

And she had been brought to this spot to keep her from acting in an unwomanly way! That assertion was like a knife in an unhealed wound.

"Will you tell me where I am?" she demanded, when she found she could not parry his thrusts. "And when you'll let me leave this place?"

"It ain't needful that you should know just where you are, but I don't mind telling you that you're in a part of the Barancas Mine; a part that's never visited; and that you'll be kept here till I'm ready to have you let out!"

"And why do you herd with masked men? Why do they obey you?"

He laughed harshly, even though he winced.

"Perhaps I'm one, myself!" he averred.

Then, not caring to talk longer with her, he took his departure, leaving her to reflect on what she had learned.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DANGEROUS TRAIL.

"We've got to keep our eyes peeled!" Lariat Bill declared, peering over the crest of a sandy knoll at the dim trail that still led on into the hills.

He and the Spangled Sport were following up the trail that they hoped would lead them to Bessie Brandon and to Halcyon's father.

They had traveled many miles, by devious paths. Night was now approaching. The trail had not grown plainer, but rather the reverse.

There were some things about it, too, that inclined the cowboy to extra caution.

Occasionally there seemed attempts to make the trail clearer than the nature of the ground warranted. This hinted of ambuscade.

Then, they were fearful of pursuit. They could not doubt that Ina Brandon had told to Bob Brandon all she had heard of the talk between Lariat Bill and Susan Crabtree.

Thus informed and warned, what was more likely than that Brandon would either put pursuers on their track or would seek to slay them by means of an ambush.

They admitted into their calculations the thought that Ina Brandon might have found it impossible to communicate with Bob Brandon! So far as they could ascertain, Bob Brandon was not in Santa Fe at the time.

"Things begin to look more an' more as if them chaps was up to snuff!" Lariat Bill continued, still squinting across the knoll. "See that mark in the sand! It looks powerful like they was afraid we might lose the trail in this rough country we've been havin' back a ways, and that they wanted to set us right! I never like to see things o' that kind! Still, that may 'a' been done without them havin' any slich idea!"

They were anxious to continue their advance; to follow the trail as long as the light held; and, when they were reasonably certain none of their foes were near, they left the cover of the knoll and again went forward.

With much circumspection did the cowboy move on. He noted every mark, every turned cone of the pinone, every displacement of pebbles. Nothing escaped his eagle-like vision.

A mile more was passed over. The night was coming nearer and nearer.

"You stay right hyer and I'll look around a bit!" Lariat cautioned. "I want to find out what's out there in front of us before we go on!"

With this he slipped away.

Hardly was he out of sight when the sport heard a shot. He could not tell whether it had been fired by Lariat or by some one else, and, to learn the facts, he crept to the top of a rocky mound.

The character of the country had undergone a change during the last mile covered. There was now very little sand. All the hills were rocky, and the earth itself was, in places, a rocky floor, over which trailing was impossible.

Looking down from the crest of rock the Spangled Sport saw Lariat Bill running at the top of his speed at right angles to the direction he had taken, and he was pursued by a man on horseback.

It seemed probable that this man had fired the shot, though the cowboy swung a revolver in his hand.

The sport drew one of his own revolvers and would have run out to the assistance of the imperilled cowboy, but at that moment Lariat Bill plunged into a trap. Hooded men rose all about him and he was hurled to the earth and instantly rendered helpless.

If Hal had ventured out, he, too, would have been made a prisoner and thus have been rendered incapable of giving the cowboy aid.

The horseman was hooded, like his comrades, and now rode into the group.

The sport was nervous and uneasy, and knew not what course to pursue; but he was not given time for careful thought. Several of the band hastened back along the cowboy's trail, with the evident intention of capturing his pal.

Halcyon glanced over the path by which he had climbed to the hill. It was rocky and he had left no marks of his ascent.

Nevertheless, he was rendered so uneasy by this movement of his foes, that he slid down from his high perch and

continued on over the rocky earth to a more distant point.

He was careful to leave no traces of this flight, and, on gaining his new station, he was delighted to find a hole in a wall, above a narrow ledge.

He crept into this, drew about the hole some vines that helped to conceal it, and looked out.

He could see the party below that held the cowboy prisoner, but none of them had seen him, so that he began to feel comparatively safe.

The thickening of the shadows promised to aid him, too, for the search could not be kept up long because of the coming darkness.

He was pleased to note that the cowboy appeared uninjured. No hand had yet been lifted against him with murderous inclination, though this was a thing not likely to be long delayed.

The sport's thoughts and attention were drawn from this by the appearance of the searching party. This party was drawing threateningly near. They were even at the base of the rocky hill up which he had first crept.

They scaled this and then came on in his direction.

He believed one of them was Bob Brandon, for, though the villain's face was so thoroughly covered up and the clothing was of the roughest character, there was something in the man's form and movements that suggested Brandon.

All of them drew so near that he could hear their words.

Several times they looked up at the ledge where was the hole in which the sport crouched, but they went on, after some discussion, and the hunted man began to breathe freely.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DARING EFFORT MEETS WITH SUCCESS.

The gloom of the falling night thickened. From his high position the Spangled Sport saw the baffled searching party return to the main body, and soon after saw them all set off.

His anxiety, which had constantly increased, now reached a feverish point. He could not, he would not, abandon the cowboy. No matter what the personal peril, he would follow that retreating band of hooded robbers and assassins.

With this resolve growing stronger and stronger, he crept down from his rocky perch and set off on the trail.

There might be an ambush at or near the point where the villains had stopped, he knew, but he took every precaution with which he was acquainted, and approached the spot.

It did not require much time to convince him that the fellows were gone.

The trail was broad and plain, for they had not tried to hide it.

He recalled what Lariat Bill had deduced from a similar circumstance, but he would not go back.

He had, at times, to stoop to the ground and feel for the imprints of shoes and of horses' hoofs.

He covered more than a mile in this way, then halted, and stared straight ahead. A light had appeared—the light of a camp-fire.

He saw the hooded band gathered about it, their faces all hidden behind those impenetrable masks.

He saw, besides, something that stirred his blood. Lariat Bill was near the fire, in the midst of the hooded band, and preparations seemed going forward for his hanging.

There was a rope over the limb of a tree, and the cowboy was standing beneath the dangling noose, bound and helpless in the presence of his awful fate.

The courage of the sport rose to the heroic. He was always a brave man; now his bravery assumed the highest form.

He resolved to rescue his pard or die in the attempt.

He made a cautious circuit of the outlaw camp, looking for something, he hardly knew what, that would suggest a hopeful plan. There was not a minute to be lost, as he knew,

The camp was in a rocky place, and all about the rocks towered. The point gained by Hal put him below the camp instead of above it.

He crept close up to the camp, still puzzled, and heard the words:

"Now, up with him, boys! He'll not foller us again!"

A number of men had hold of the loose end of the rope. The noose was about Larkins' neck, and, at the word of command, they began to pull.

The sport's revolvers were in his hands, and, when he saw the rope begin to tighten, his revolvers sent forth their fire.

The man who had given the command fell forward on his face; the one next him reeled sideways, putting a hand to his side. All were startled and panic-stricken.

Again and again the revolvers spoke. Their rain of fire and lead was most demoralizing. It was impossible to tell whether one man was doing the shooting or a dozen, so quickly did the shots follow each other.

One of the balls, fortunately, cut the rope above the cowboy's head; another shattered the wooden leg of Peg-leg Hamil—for he was of the party—and caused him to roll from the fire in a terrified and demoralized state.

Before the revolvers were empty the members of the band had sought shelter behind convenient rocks, with the exception of one or two, who were in no condition to move.

Lariat Bill's quick wit made him certain the shots came from the weapons of the sport, and not from a body of armed men, and, when he found he was free to move, he dropped to the earth and rolled, as the others had done, behind one of the big rocks.

This brought him against Peg-leg Hamil, who had sought the same shelter, and who now cried out in fear, revealing himself to the cowboy.

"So, it's you, is it?" demanded Lariat Bill, in a threatening whisper. "Untie these ropes, or I'll send you to kingdom come, in a jiffy. D'ye hear me? Untie 'em, quick!"

"Oh, I can't," the bum moaned. "I'm killed! I'm shot all to pieces! Oh! oh!"

"Well, you'll be shot a good deal wuss if you don't do as I say," the cowboy blustered. "Them's my friends out there, and when I tell 'em that you wouldn't untie me they'll make mince meat out o' you."

The bum replied with a groan.

"Do ye hear me?" putting his lips to Peg-leg's ear. "Untie me, quick! I'll speak a good word fer ye, if you do! If you don't—"

The scared rascal tried to rise to his feet, and began wildly to feel about in the gloom.

"Hyer!" guided the cowboy, in a loud whisper. "Rip these off with your knife. No monkeyfuglin' now, neither!"

He turned his back to the bum and pushed his bound hands into position.

Another shot from Halcyon's pistols caused the bum to jerk out the knife and slash at the cords.

One blow sufficed. The cowboy's hands were free. He snatched away the knife, and, with one cut, removed the cords from his feet.

"Correct," he whispered. "I'm obliged to you. I'll jist keep this knife, fer fear you'll hurt yerself with it! So long!"

The outlaws were regaining, somewhat, their sense and their courage. It began to dawn on them that the attack had not been made by a number of men, but by one man, and they well knew who that one man was.

Loud calls from one to the other were now heard, asking as to the condition of affairs. The cowboy knew that in a few moments they would be in a condition to do some shooting on their own account.

The time had come for him to go, and he went, without questioning.

The bum sent up a warning cry as the cowboy glided away from the rock.

Lariat Bill had noted well the point from whence the shots had seemed to come, and for that point he made.

He moved with the writhing motion of a serpent, and, in a marvelously short time, rose by the side of the Spangled Sport, seeming to emerge from the very earth.

The sport gave a convulsive start as the cowboy's head appeared by him.

"Don't stampe," Lariat Bill cautioned. "It's on'y me, and I reckon it's on'y you a-makin' all that racket! You'll do to tie to! Let's slide!"

Hal's astonishment was not so great but that he turned around immediately and crawled after the cowboy, who glided silently on into the darkness.

The rising calls of the outlaws were heard behind them, reminding the sport of the gathering together of a scattered covey of quails after the devastating sportsman has disappeared.

"They'll be on our trail in a little while!" Lariat Bill asserted. "You give 'em a powerful skeer, but it won't last long. They'll find that they've been everlasting' fools, and they'll come b'ilin' along like a lot of red hot bald hornets!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE HOME OF THE HOODED BAND.

The Spangled Sport and Bill Larkins lay in a hollow of the hills and looked down on a singular and interesting scene.

Below them was a strange valley, and this valley was occupied.

It was, in appearance, a gigantic crater. Its walls were of lava, and presented a solid rim or circle, except at one point, through which a dried-up creek made its way.

All through this section the indications of volcanic action were apparent. In remote ages, gigantic convulsions of nature had taken place, producing the effects now seen. The little valley was, no doubt, in that distant time, a crater, from which the molten lava rolled to scorch and kill the life of the surrounding regions.

But it was a pleasant enough place, as viewed by the sport and his cowboy pard.

Grass had sprung up, for a soil of decomposed lava rock filled the interior, and by the water holes of the streamless creek were a number of horses. Many log houses were visible, all strong enough to make a good resistance against any ordinary attack.

The beholders were sure that what they saw was the hill home of the hooded band, that mysterious organization that lived by robbery, and acknowledged the leadership of the Santa Fe gamblers, Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor.

Men were to be seen here and there, moving about carelessly, as if there was never any occasion to fear danger in this secluded place.

Nearly twenty-four hours had passed since the events given description in the preceding chapter. The sport and the cowboy had passed over many weary miles. Yet they were not as far from Santa Fe as may be expected.

They were between Santa Fe and the Barrancas Mine, in the hilly country lying back of the pueblo of Juarez.

The dim trail of the retreating party had led them to this vicinity, and had then eluded them, but the keenness of the cowboy had enabled them to alight, finally, on the place they sought.

Lariat Bill was inclined to give the credit to Providence, for he felt that he could not be credited with finding a thing to which no clew led. It seemed, otherwise, that they had merely stumbled on the discovery.

"In there," and Lariat's voice trembled. "is the girl we've come to help—and, I hope, your father!"

"I sincerely hope you may be right."

"I'm jist giving you my opinions!" admitted Lariat. "Course I don't reely know anything 'bout it. But I'm certain the chaps we was trailin'—the chaps that was a-goin' to treat me to a necktie—air in there."

The sport was not loath to believe the same thing. If not there, he did not know where, then, to look for Bessie Brandon and his father.

He found himself persistently putting the girl first in his thoughts. He could not help it, any more than he could help loving her, and he did not want to help that!

Again the sun was low in the west. The tops of the surrounding hills were covered with light, and where the sun gilded the rim of the old crater it resembled a huge loop of gold.

But the watchers in the hollow of the adjacent hills gave no heed to the glories and beauties of the landscape. Their heads were filled with more practical things—with plans of how they were to get into the home of the hooded band, and of what they were to do and to find there.

The sky slowly darkened, the sun vanished, the night descended on the scene.

Then they crept, like prowling wolves, from their hiding-place, and approached the crater's rim.

By slow and cautious degrees they made their way around to the point where the opening had been made by the stream.

Here they found a sentinel posted.

It would have been possible for Lariat Bill to approach and silence the fellow, but neither Lariat nor Halcyon Hal desired that.

They waited until the shadows grew denser.

Then, having discovered the things to be avoided, they moved forward on their hands and knees, and, after some careful crawling, passed the sentinel and found themselves within the crater and not far from the log buildings.

From these, lights and fires now shone, and, near the center of the town—if so it may be called—a bonfire leaped, making all about it as bright as day.

They kept away from this bonfire and hugged the crater's rim.

It was their plan to make the circuit of the houses, going from one to another, until they located the prisoners or were sure they were not in the camp.

It was the only plan that offered success. That it was full of danger did not deter them in the least.

They crawled up to the nearest house. It was one of the largest, and somewhat suggestive of a prison.

The sport crouched in the grass, while Lariat Bill lifted himself to the little window and peered into the interior. The window was a mere slit in the walls, curtained by a blanket, and the view gained was none of the best.

There were some occupants, talking, but the voices were unfamiliar. No indications of prisoners could be discovered.

From this house they crawled on to the next, and the next, with the same result at each.

The door of the next house was open, though no light came from it. They heard some one stumping about in it, and Lariat Bill writhed around to the front to ascertain who this person was.

Hal followed him closely, making no more noise than the cowboy. The sport was an apt pupil, and, under the cowboy's tuition, was becoming skilled in border craft.

Some one stepped from the door of the house just as Lariat Bill got in position in front of it. He halted, as if suspicious, and the sport, whose heart was hammering painfully, wondered if he had discovered the cowboy's presence.

As for Bill Larkins, he lay as silent on the grass as the shadows, and as motionless.

The front of this house was turned toward the rim of the crater, facing somewhat toward the broken point through which the creek flowed, so that its door was not visible to the occupants of the other houses.

The man who had come out of the house moved clumsily forward and slipped the slide of a bull's-eye lantern, intending to pour its light out over the grass and cover the intruder, should there be one, but his movements were not quick enough.

A revolver, hurled through the air with surprising accuracy, caught him in the face and bowled him over. The lantern, with the slide but half open, rolled from his nerveless fingers.

Before he could recover or cry out, Lariat Bill was astride his neck, choking him, and the sport had got hold of the lantern and shut off the light.

"Let's see who it is," whispered Lariat, tightening his grip, from which the frightened rascal tried vainly to break. "I've a mighty big suspicion, from the way he's thumpin' me in the back!"

The light was turned into the man's face, and, to Halcyon's great astonishment, the swollen features of Peg-leg Hamil were revealed.

"Just as I thought," whispered the cowboy. "Shet off the light."

The slide was closed, the lantern dropped on the grass, and some cord was produced from the pockets of the sport.

"I hoped to use that for a horse-halter if fortune favored," he said. "But, take it!"

A minute later Peg-leg Hamil's hands and feet were tied fast, and the cowboy, crouching before him, was threatening him with instant death if he did not comply with every demand.

Truly, the bum seemed to be having a hard time of it.

"Got yer wooden leg cured a'ready, I see?" said Lariat. "Well, if you don't talk fast and straight, you'll be crippled up in a way that'll puzzle all the doctors in New Mexico to put you together. D'ye hear?"

Peg-leg nodded assent.

"Well, then, is Bessie Brandon in this hyer camp?"

The query apparently surprised the bum. They could not see his features, since the light had been shut off, but they judged this by his movements.

He hesitated, and the question was re-asked.

"She hain't."

"That's the truth, is it? You ought to know, by this time, that I won't stand no nonsense, Peg-leg!"

"It's the truth," the bum doggedly asserted.

"Then, where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Is Talbott Vennor here?" Halcyon Hal put in. "The real Talbott Vennor, you understand? Not this gambler-outlaw from Santa Fe?"

"No!"

The bum was trembling with fear. These men, who could penetrate behind the crater's rim and gain access to the camp were men to be feared in his estimation. And the fact that, only the day before, he had been threatened by one of them, made him even more cowardly. How had they found the camp, which no foe, heretofore, had ever discovered?

"You're sure of that? Do you know where he is, then?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout him," Peg-leg persisted.

They were almost sure he was lying, though his words evinced candor.

But they could get no other reply.

Hal had recovered the cowboy's revolver with which the bum had been knocked down, and now they considered what they should do. It was hardly safe to leave the bum behind them and continue the exploration of the camp, yet they had not seen enough to satisfy them.

They felt that they must go on, and a handkerchief was quickly applied as a gag.

Then, taking with them the lantern, they moved off, creeping and crouching along in the same cautious way as before.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MEETING MOST UNEXPECTED.

Three other houses were inspected, without material result; then they were greeted to a surprise.

Lariat Bill lifted himself to a window, and dropped back with an exclamation indicative of such intense astonishment that Halcyon Hal was moved to inquire its cause.

"Jist git up hyer, careful-like, and keep out of the light, an' peek in there an' tell me if my eyes air in eclipse or if that's a ginooine woman I see."

His words were tremulous and eager.

The sport wormed into position and did as asked.

His astonishment was as great as the cowboy's, for, within the room, he saw no less a person than Miss Susan Crabtree.

It was enough to make them doubt their sanity. Miss Susan Crabtree, according to their best information and belief, was, at that moment, beneath the roof of the Arcade in Santa Fe.

Halcyon Hal felt like pinching himself to make sure he was awake.

Yet there could be no doubt that they saw before them Susan Crabtree. Her features were too marked, and altogether too familiar, to permit of an error in that respect.

Yes, Susan Crabtree, the woman whom the cowboy loved, and in whom he had implicitly trusted, was in the home of the hooded band—was there, enjoying liberty, to all appearances! There were no bonds on her, nor did her room bear the impress of a prison.

She was sitting near the window—so near that, if there had been no panes, the cowboy could have reached through and touched her—and she was reading, by the light of a dim, tallow candle.

Both the cowboy and the sport dropped down into the grass beneath the window, and the former gave utterance to his bewilderment in a low and questioning whistle.

"Knocks me silly," he admitted. "Whatever she's a-doin' hyer I can't guess! Tain't so long sence I left her in Santa Fe, and she hadn't any idea, then, of comin' hyer; leastways, if she had any sich idea, she didn't take the trouble to communicate it to yours truly."

He seemed to expect some word from the sport that would clear away the mystery, but the sport was equally befogged.

"It goes ahead of me," was the sport's confession. "Though there can't be any doubt that it is Miss Crabtree."

"What I says to myself! It's her, an' what in Sam Hill is she doin' hyer? I'm a-goin' to ask her!"

He proceeded to put his determination into execution.

He wormed away from the window and made his way to the door.

This he rapped on, softly.

They heard her start, and then come in their direction.

"Who's there?" she demanded.

"It's me!" the cowboy replied, putting his lips to the keyhole. "I's me, Bill Larkins!"

She recognized the voice, and after a moment's hesitation removed a bar from the door and drew the door carefully open.

She thrust her head through to make sure she had heard and divined aright.

Bill Larkins put his face almost against hers.

"It's all right!" he whispered. "It's me and the sport! Kin we come in an' talk to you a minute? What in tarnation air you doin' hyer?"

"Wait a second!" she whispered.

Then she glided away, still leaving the door slightly ajar, and they saw her move the candle so that its light could not be seen from the window.

She tiptoed back, opened the door wider, and bade them enter.

Her voice was filled with suppressed excitement.

Once within, the trio engaged in mutual stares; then they fell to talking and asking questions.

"A little too much light in hyer, yit!" decided Bill, and he blew out the candle. "I don't keer to take any resks that I don't hev to! Come too near a-goin' over the divide yistiday fer that!"

In the same breath, almost, he went on to tell her how he had been captured; and how he had been rescued by the sport after he had been got ready for the noose.

"I'm terribly afraid you'll be seen in here!" averred Susan, in trembling tones.

It was plain that her fear was not entirely personal; and it is probable she thought much more of the peril that such a discovery would bring to Lariat Bill than she did of the peril to herself.

"But you haint told me how you come hyer?" the cowboy interrupted, turning her thoughts to other things. "We've been out a-huntin' fer this place; and, when we found it, we sneaked in! I don't allow that you did!"

"I'm here because Bob Brandon wanted me to come!" she said, quietly. "You remember when you seen me there last?"

"You jist bet I do! Hain't li'ble to fergit it soon!"

"After you went away—some time afterward—Bob Brandon come to me and told me that he wanted me to go with him to a mining camp out in the hills, where there was cooking to do and where I could make myself useful!"

"I guessed in a minute what he was up to, though I never let on. He said the mine was a new one, and that I wouldn't be wanted there long,—only long enough to get things goin', when some other girl would be got to take my place!"

"He said, too, that Ina would be there!"

"Of course, I wasn't dyin' to be where she was, as you must know; but still I didn't say nothing. Finally he went away, saying for me to think it over and that he'd be back after awhile to git my answer!"

"And what did you figger he was up to?" the cowboy asked.

It was easy to see that a great load was being lifted from his mind. When he first saw this woman sitting by the window he had feared she was leagued with the robbers, but now he began to see that he had done her rank injustice by harboring such a suspicion for an instant. She was still true to him and to his cause.

"I knowed he wanted to git me away from Santa Fe, so that I couldn't talk in a way that might hurt them. They thought I knowed too much fer their good, and didn't want me to tell what I had found out. It was a very critical time for them, I thought!"

"You bet it was!" avowed the cowboy, with considerable vehemence. "But not half so bad as the time that is coming."

"I didn't have to come, of course; I could have left the Arcade and put myself where they'd 'a' had a good deal of trouble in finding me. I thought it all over, and finally thought I'd best come!"

"Why?"

She seemed loth to tell.

"Well, if you must know"—when he had repeated the question—"it was so I could help you and your friend. I figgered that if I come to this camp—I knowed, in reason, that it was their mountain camp where they wanted to take me!—I might learn something that would be worth a good deal to you, mebbe! That's why I come, if you must know!"

She made the confession in a shy and loving way, and the cowboy, whose heart was overflowing, was strongly tempted to take her in his arms, despite the presence of the sport, and give her a comprehensive hug.

"You're a brick!" he asserted, as if that were the highest compliment possible. "I'm proud o' you, I am! I didn't allow you had that much grit! 'Tain't common in a woman!"

"Let me go on and tell what my coming amounted to!" she requested, anxious to escape these praises.

"Correct!" and he dropped back and became all attention. "What did you find out? That's business! That's comin' to the p'int, that is! I was jist a-goin' to ask you that!"

The sport was too eager to hear, and altogether too anxious, or he might have been amused at this outburst.

"This is the home of a band of road-agents that air under Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor, and they've been not only robbing you of the Barrancas Mine, but they've been robbing the stages, and men who travel through the country alone!"

"But about Bessie Brandon!" interrupted Hal, to whom this was addressed.

These other things were not news to him.

"She ain't here! She's held in the Barrancas Mine!"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sure as I can be of anything. I overheard Brandon talking about it, soon after I got here! He said that was where she was!"

"We've come to the wrong place, but it turns out to be the right place, likewise, for now we know where to go!" said the cowboy, exuberantly.

With all this talk and excitement, they were not forgetful of the perils of their situation. They hardly dared speak above a whisper. All about them, as they knew, were men who would kill them, if but the opportunity came. It seemed really too bad to thus expose Miss Crabtree.

"Is my father there, too?" the sport went on. "Tell me of him!"

"I don't know anything of him. I have not heard his name spoke. When they speak of Talbott Vennor, you know, they always mean the Talbott Vennor of the Arcade, and not your father!"

Hal could not help being disappointed. He had hoped to learn something concerning his father's fate. It began to appear that his father had perished. Such a thing was what he had feared.

But he was duly grateful for the information about Bessie Brandon. He believed she could be rescued.

Yet, amid his jubilation, he sometimes stopped to ask himself the question, who was he to rescue Bessie Brandon from? From her father?

"It won't do to stay here too long!" he cautioned.

He was beginning to want to get out of the outlaw camp. Everything had been learned that was to be learned, it seemed, and further stay there only made danger for them.

The cowboy, however, was continuing the talk with Miss Susan Crabtree, and did not appear anxious to bring it to a close.

"I will go out and reconnoiter a little!" said Haleyon Hal, knowing he could not better please Lariat Bill.

With this, he stepped cautiously out into the gloom.

But he was back, almost before Lariat Bill had had time to whisper a word of love into his sweetheart's ear or to imprint a single kiss on her cheek.

"I'm afraid some one's coming this way!" he announced.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CLEVER SUSAN.

The sport's announcement created a flutter of alarm. All stood quite still, in the darkness of the room, listening.

The pattering of feet came to their ears, and, beyond that, sounded other noises, that made it certain the camp was astir.

"There's been something found out!" Lariat Bill declared. "Likely they've found Peg-leg!"

Such a thing was very probable, and had been more than half expected.

Peg-leg Hamil had not been found, however. He had succeeded in getting the gag out of his mouth and the cords off his hands, and had sent up a cry that had brought his comrades hurrying to him.

As fast as he could talk he had told the story of the outrage to which he had been subjected, and pointed out the direction he believed his enemies had taken.

His words had created a sensation. So daring a thing had not entered the dreams of the outlaws. They were humiliated, fear-stricken and angered.

A search was instantly instituted, and the steps of those engaging in it were those that reached the ears of the sport.

"I reckon we'd best cut sticks!" said the cowboy, bending his head toward the sounds. "They're comin' along lively! We mustn't be caught hyer! 'Twouldn't do fer Susan!"

He nervously jerked out the exclamations.

The sport realized the force of his assertions. It would not do for them to be caught there. It would place Miss Crabtree in a perilous and compromising situation.

Yet they feared to leap out through the door, for they were likely to be both seen and heard, and so bring about the discovery they wished to avoid.

Personal and individual danger was not what they most feared.

Miss Crabtree knew what was in their minds, and knew how serious was their position, and she acted with quick decision.

She stepped to a plank in the center of the floor, which she lifted. The dark cavity beneath could hardly be discerned because of the gloom in the room. The men gazed down into it with astonishment.

They were not given time for questions.

"Slip down in there!" she urged. "It's the best thing you can do now! I don't think any one has an idea you're here."

She fairly pushed the sport into the hole, and Lariat Bill followed him. They could not afford to argue the point.

The pattering of feet was near the door, and a second later Bob Brandon's heavy voice sounded.

A heavy thump on the door followed.

"Open up this thing!" he demanded.

"Quick, or I'll kick it from the hinges! Have you got any body in there with you that hadn't ought to be there?"

"The scoundrel! I could choke him!" Lariat Bill growled.

Susan Crabtree was heard to fly to the door and hastily unbar it.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Her tones were shaky—as they very naturally would be, under such circumstances.

"There's been two men in this camp that haven't any business in it! Have you seen 'em?"

He swung a lantern in her face.

"It's not likely that men would be comin' here!" she snapped, evasively. "I'm surprised at such a question!"

The door was open and a number of searchers grouped themselves about it, listening to the words and answers.

"They were in this camp! They captured and tied Peg-leg, and they must have come this way. You're sure you didn't see 'em?"

"I did not!" she lied, with cool deliberation. "Come in and look fer 'em; I'm not objectin'!"

She was risking a good deal in this bold challenge, for she knew that Bob Brandon was aware of the hole in the floor.

"Scatter out and keep it up, boys!" Brandon commanded, turning to those around the door. "They can't get away. We've got 'em. The pass is guarded! Rout 'em out, and send along that bloodhound! We'll put him on the trail!"

Miss Crabtree had seen the brute mentioned, and her fear became almost a panicky terror. If that bloodhound took up the trail, she could not escape suspicion. Her falsehood would be revealed, for the bloodhound would track the cowboy and the sport into her room.

The light of the lantern was on her, but she concealed her agitation with a good deal of skill.

The men hurried away as commanded.

She gave a swift glance at the board in the center of the floor.

The glance was observed by Brandon.

"I don't know but you've been lyin' to me, after all!" he fumed, stepping forward.

The board was revealed by the light.

Her face paled.

Brandon stooped and lifted up the board. Then Susan's face cleared and a look of triumph came to it.

There was not a soul to be seen in the hole. The men who had gone into it had vanished.

Brandon scanned the hole with care. There ought to be marks, he thought, to

tell whether Susan had lied or not. There was some freshly tumbled earth.

"You see that?" he snapped.

"Certainly!" and she coolly nodded her head. "You pulled that down with your feet when you poked into the hole before!"

She was regaining her nerve.

"You know you showed it to me, and told me if I was ever in danger from drunken men, to slip into that hole and make my way out!"

Brandon recollected the circumstance.

"I was a fool!" he said. "One can never trust a woman."

He had not thought then of such a contingency as had occurred. How could he think that these men would make their way into the crater camp—a camp which had never even been discovered before?

He threw the plank into position.

"Well, whether they were in here or not, they can't get away! That's dead certain! We'll have them in a little while!"

He took much satisfaction in making these assertions, knowing they would distress her.

"Who air these men?" she asked, with consummate art.

He stared at her. He had not spoken their names, as he now recalled.

"I thought you knew!" he averred.

"I was sure of it! Well, you'll not feel good when I tell you! They were Lariat Bill Larkins and the fellow that calls himself Haleyon Hal."

He watched her face eagerly.

It took on a look of alarm. This was a bit of acting not to be expected from Susan Crabtree, and it completely threw the outlaw off the trail. He fancied it a proof that Miss Crabtree had not known until that moment who the hunted men were.

"And we'll get 'em!" he continued, still studying her features. "There can't be any doubt about that! We've got a bloodhound, and the pass is doubly guarded. They can't get away!"

And, in making these assertions, Bob Brandon felt sure he was right.

CHAPTER XXX.

A WAY OF ESCAPE.

We must return for a few moments to Bessie Brandon, imprisoned in the Barrancas Mine, for her actions there had a marked influence on the events we are chronicling.

When the fact that her father was her captor was brought so forcibly to her knowledge, she was fairly crushed. She had long known that her father was not a man of fine instincts, that in many ways he was little better than a thief, and that he held human life all too lightly, yet she had not thought he would treat her so.

Now, he boldly confessed his guilt in this respect, and even half-confessed that he was a road-agent.

The humiliation, the disgrace of it, made her sick at heart.

She felt, likewise, a deep disgust and a growing hate.

If she had desired before to escape from her prison, the desire was now intensified. By bribery or otherwise, she resolved to make her escape.

So, when the outlaw came again with food for her, she repeated her offer, and increased it by promising to deposit a certain sum of money for him in a secret place near Santa Fe.

The rascal's eyes were covetous as before, and she could readily see that he wanted to aid her for the sake of the gain, yet feared to. And this great fear kept him from doing anything. He shook his head, in absolute refusal.

"'Twouldn't be healthy fer me!" he grinned, twisting his head about as if he feared he might be overheard. "I 'low you don't hardly know what you're askin'. These pals of mine ain't a bit p'tickler what they does sometimes, and I've known a feller that strayed from the chalk-line to be found with a knife stickin' in his breast. So, you see!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WILD FLIGHT.

He finished with an expressive shrug of his shoulders, and, after that, seemed to desire to avoid the subject.

Bessie Brandon was disheartened, but not utterly cast down.

A day went by, and the privileges granted to her were increased. She was permitted to pass through the rock door and to lounge in the sun.

The view she had was a very pleasant one. To gain it, she had to mount a ladder to the surface of the earth above; but she then beheld the hills stretching away to the blue mountain peaks. Her thoughts naturally were more given to some effort to escape than to the scenery.

All the afternoon the rock door was left open and she was permitted to move about at pleasure. No guard was stationed near. Yet, whenever she mounted to the open space above, she was certain to see the head of a man dodging amid the cedars on the nearest slope.

She knew she was closely watched.

Her father did not return to renew the talk that had been so disagreeable. She felt his absence to be a relief, and began to dread his reappearance.

Continually she revolved plans offering some hope. The most feasible seemed to be to make a break across the hills, yet how desperate this was.

Could she expect to escape in that way? She could not trust to her speed or her strength. The hills were unfamiliar to her.

Still, she knew what direction Santa Fe lay from the Barrancas Mine, and about the distance.

Determined to test how much of freedom she might enjoy, she walked out along the edge of the hills, apparently paying no heed to the man who was watching her.

Here and there she plucked a flower.

When she had left the mouth of the mine a quarter of a mile the man appeared before her, placing himself across her path.

"This is as far as you can go, miss," he said, touching his hat. "I has my orders."

"I was enjoying the walk so much," and she looked at him appealingly. "You couldn't let me go on to the top of that ridge?"

He shook his head, and seemed to plant himself more sturdily.

"I has my orders, miss! You air furdur now than I was told to let you go."

"And who gave you those orders?"

He glanced at her in quick surprise.

"I don't know as it's any harm to tell! Bob Brandon's the chap. You'll know it soon enough, if you don't know it now!"

"And why am I held here?" impatiently.

He grinned and wagged his head.

"It's said that you've got too big a mouth in your pretty face! You're li'ble to talk too much! See? And you're most certain to be helpin' them that ain't any too friendly to yer dad."

She took out her watch and held it alluringly before him.

"Do you see this watch? It's a valuable one! I'll give you this watch and a hundred dollars in money if you'll let me go on! You can pretend that I slipped by you!"

His grin became more pronounced.

"That's a pretty watch, and you're a pretty gal. I've seen the time when a combination like that would rake me in. But not jist now!"

She turned from him in disgust and half in fear. Plainly, she could not hope to escape by bribery. Some other method must be sought.

Her spirits were very low, as she returned, with dragging steps, to her prison in the mine. Every avenue of escape seemed closed.

Yet a way was opening at that moment.

As she swung herself down the ladder toward the rock door, she gave a scream of fright, and came near pitching headlong to the bottom.

In a ledgy cleft, not a dozen feet away, a mountain lion crouched, with his staring yellow eyes fixed full on her.

The call for help that welled to her throat remained unuttered.

She saw the mountain lion draw its feet

together more firmly, as if meditating a spring, and then, hardly knowing what she did, she half climbed and half fell to the foot of the ladder.

She dived through the rock doorway into her prison, glad of the refuge it afforded.

And as she did so, she heard the springy thud of the lion as it leaped from the ledgy cleft to the rocks near the door.

Her fright was of a terrifying character.

In fancy, she heard the patter of its feet at her heels. She expected it to lean on her and rend her in pieces. A scream told how great was her terror.

She ran as far as she could, crowding into the extreme end of her prison, where, in her wild fear, she began to beat on the solid rock.

Then wonder of wonders!

The stone rolled aside, revealing a black cavity.

In her mad efforts she had touched some hidden spring, with this result. The stone was a door, which opened into some underground tunnel or chamber, and led she could not even conjecture where.

She knew something of the history of the Barrancas Mine. It had a history that was fascinating, romantic and bloody. Its existence had been known and it had been worked for hundreds of years.

When the early Spanish explorers reached New Mexico they found turquoises abundant among the Indians of that country, and these turquoises were procured by the Indians from several mines, one of which was the Barrancas Mine of this story.

The greedy Spaniards immediately seized on these mines, and, not content with this, forced the Indians to work the mines as slaves.

The Pueblo Indians especially suffered in this way, at their hands. These Indians had been gentle and confiding and kind, and their good deeds were repaid by Spanish perfidy and cruelty.

They were forced to work the turquoise mines, were beaten and bound, and treated with every manner of indignity.

Finally they arose in rebellion and drove the Spaniards away.

Then they sealed up the mines of the country—the mines of every description—and permitted the grass to grow above them and obliterate every trace of their existence.

Not until many years afterward were they rediscovered, and not all the mines of that region have been refound to this day.

In the Barrancas Mine and other mines, before the days of the Spaniards, galleries had been cut by the Indians and many secret passages and doors had been constructed.

Some of these had been found by the whites, and one of them was found by Bessie Brandon in the manner described.

Neither Brandon nor any of his associates knew of the existence of the concealed door which now opened under the blows delivered by the terrified girl. It was like the smiting of the rock in the wilderness from which the waters gushed, it seemed so providential.

Bessie did not stop to philosophize on the subject. She believed the mountain lion was at her heels, and she leaped into the darkness before her, heedless of what it held.

When she had passed through the singular entrance, she tried to shove the door again into place, but it would not budge. Some secret spring controlled it, which she could not find.

When she glanced back the lion was not to be seen. She was sure, however, that it was in her prison. The light from above fell downward and through the doorway, fairly illuminating the interior, but this did not reach her present position, where the gloom was Stygian.

Fearing she might step into some chasm, she got down on her hands and knees and crawled forward, carefully feeling the way.

Her great haste made this seem an unutterably slow method of progression, yet she dared not go any faster.

And the lion did not pursue?

There could be no doubt, in a little while, that the mountain lion did not intend to pursue her. She did not know what had become of it, and did not care to investigate.

Her fright was disappearing, and the thought of escape was taking possession of her. She was asking herself whither this tunnel led.

She knew now that it was a tunnel. Her sense of touch told her that. It had walls and a floor, and, without doubt, a roof.

The air was close and stuffy, in spite of that which rushed in through the rock doorway.

Yet there were no pitfalls so far, and, because of this, her courage was increasing.

There was a possibility, even a probability, that the tunnel opened somewhere into the body of the mine. Yet, even that might lead to liberty.

She knew the mine was worked, though she had seen no workmen. Her prison had not been in that portion. If she came out into some place where there were miners she would tell them her story and appeal for help. Surely, she thought, they were not of the same class as these mountain outlaws.

And thus she crawled on and on, ever deeper and deeper into the gloom.

There were turns in the tunnel, and the light that had reached her so faintly, disappeared after a time.

She dreaded to hear the sound of pursuit. There was a chance, of course, that the man she had seen on the hillside would become suspicious and institute an investigation. It was very probable that he had heard her scream.

However, she was glad she had not been able to close the door. She felt now that she did not want to cut off all chance of retreat—that it was better to be in the prison, where food and some degree of freedom were given, than to be buried alive in this dungeon of a tunnel.

It seemed of endless length.

Then, while these thoughts were troubling her, she observed that the gloom was lightening.

After a while she could even make out, in an uncertain way, the contour of the walls.

When she had gone a hundred yards farther, the floor of the tunnel was visible and she could even see her hands.

She knew that the light came from some point in advance. It was lighter in that direction, yet no opening gleamed like a star to beckon her on.

She rose to her feet and walked rapidly, and finally broke into an excited run.

The end of the tunnel was before her.

She beheld a crevice in the rocks through which the branch of a cedar was thrust, and, pushing this branch aside, she crawled through the crevice and found herself on the slope of the hill.

The sun was setting, and the shadows were already gathering in the valleys. Yet the light was fairly good where she crouched, and, for that reason, she hesitated and looked around her. She feared the watcher whom she had last seen.

She had quite recovered from her terror of the mountain lion. It was certain the beast had not followed her.

Human beings were likely to follow her, however, at any moment, who were as much or more to be dreaded than mountain lions.

She endeavored to study her surroundings, and, having made up her mind as to the direction of Santa Fe, she moved from under the screening branches of the cedar, when it grew dark enough to make such a movement safe.

The exterior mouth of the tunnel was well shielded from observation. Cedars hedged it about, together with a mass of boulders. It was quite plain that no feet had pressed it for many days, and perhaps many years.

Her heart grew lighter as she hastened down the hill.

She had fixed on certain stars that now began to twinkle for her guidance. By moving constantly toward them, she had

lieved she would not stray far from a true line.

She felt that her adventure was of a desperate character. She had already received evidence that the hills were likely to be infested with wild animals. The far-away howl of a coyote sounded on the evening air, causing her to shudder.

Notwithstanding all this, she was filled with hope. If she could only reach Santa Fe, she had friends there to whom she could appeal. They would save her even from her own father.

And the reader may be sure that she thought of Halcyon Hal. In truth, her thoughts were seldom away from him. She wondered where he was and what he was doing. If he had observed her absence from the town! If he had made inquiries concerning her?

She had done enough to earn his gratitude, if not his love. He could not forget her, she knew that. She had saved his life!

And her father had charged her with unwomanly conduct in so doing! With unwomanly conduct in carrying that message of warning, garbed like a man.

Had Halcyon Hal also thought her conduct worthy of reproach? Ah! that was a thought that stung!

With such reflections did her active brain teem as she struggled across the hills, guided by those calmly twinkling stars.

Until the night was far spent did she push on. Then, forced by her failing strength to stop anyway, she found shelter on a cedar-clad hill and rested until after sunrise.

Fear of pursuit would not permit her to stay there longer. She got up and stumbled on.

A half mile beyond she turned the angle of the hill and found herself face to face with a man.

He was a stranger, strangely clad. His coat was like that of a Pueblo shepherd. Yet he was a white man.

He stared at her in undisguised amazement, as she ran toward him. A flush of pleasure mantled his face, and the stick with which he had been striking at the pebbles, he dropped, as if excited.

Then, looking beyond him into the valley that lay at the foot of the hills, she saw a scanty stream meandering through small squares of irrigated land, and by it a Pueblo village.

She had not the least idea in the world who the man was, nor what the place was, though the man was the real Talbott Vennor, and the pueblo was the village of Juarez.

On the farthest slope, in plain view, now, were two or three Indian children, who eyed her sharply and suspiciously as she ran to Vennor.

These children really were Vennor's guardians. On the hill above them was a signal pole, to which flags could be attached, by which warning could be sent to the village if Vennor attempted to escape. There were, too, on the hill, quantities of dry brushwood ready to be fired for the same purpose.

Vennor had tried to escape a dozen times or more. Once he had pulled down the signal staff; another time he had scattered the brush and tied the children, but on every occasion the warning had reached the Indians below and he had been recaptured after a brief run and a savage fight.

In consequence of these repeated failures he had lost hope, and now several months had elapsed since his last attempt to get away.

It can be imagined, therefore, how great was his surprise when he saw this girl coming toward him across the brow of the hill. It had been so long since he had beheld a white face! It is little to be wondered that he dropped the stick in great excitement, and when she came close up to him and addressed him, he could hardly find his tongue.

He looked toward the children and toward the pueblo, in an uncertain way.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "but you're a white man, and for that reason I know you will help me!"

Help her? Who was more helpless than he?

"What can I do for you?" he asked, bitterly feeling his inability to do anything. "I am a prisoner here, a prisoner of the Pueblos, and I'm much afraid you will get yourself in trouble by speaking to me. What is your name and where are you from?"

He spoke hurriedly, still glancing around in a fearful manner.

She answered his questions, and told him how she was trying to get back to Santa Fe.

"Santa Fe!" his eyes lighting. "Do you know a man there by the name of Harry Vennor? He is my son! He has been in Santa Fe!"

"Harry Vennor? I do not recall the name!"

He showed his disappointment.

"He was there! I so hoped you might know something about him!"

How could she know that the Harry Vennor of whom he inquired was Halcyon Hal, the sport? Yet she might have guessed it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PUEBLOS GET ANOTHER PRISONER.

A flaming arrow, shot by one of the children, soared upward from the top of the hill, carrying warning to the Pueblos of what was taking place.

"Do you see that?" he asked, with sudden despondency. "It is always so. Let anything new in my movements occur and some sort of a warning is sent. Sometimes it is a fire, sometimes an arrow, as you see. I can no more get away from here than if I was in an iron cage. The Pueblos will be here soon."

"But could we not run across the hill and hide somewhere?"

He shook his head.

"It would be of no use. Haven't I tried it? Haven't I tried everything? Do you think I'd stay here as I have if there had been any chance of getting away?"

"How long have you been here?" she asked, sympathetically.

"Months and months! I've almost lost track of mine. It's a wonder I haven't lost my mind!"

"Let us walk on down toward the pueblo. We'll be better treated if we don't run."

A look of anxiety came to her.

"Do you mean that I'm not at liberty to go on?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm afraid that by coming to me you have made yourself a prisoner. They will probably be afraid that you will carry some news to my son in Santa Fe."

She started as if to leave him, her intention being to hurry across the point of the hill and endeavor to conceal herself somewhere among the rocks.

But she had no more than turned around when she saw that this plan offered no hope. Two stalwart Indians were advancing from the very direction in which she had thought to escape.

"You see it's no use," Vennor assured, with increasing despondency.

Her fears increased; nor were they made less when she turned in another way and there also saw Indians advancing.

Two minutes later the heads of a dozen were visible in various places.

In that short space of time had they formed a cordon about Vennor and the girl, which they now proceeded to tighten.

"We might as well walk on toward the pueblo. Trust me! It's the best and the only thing we can do!"

The sudden appearance of these Indians, as much as his words, told her that he was right, and that the course indicated was the wisest.

So she turned about and walked slowly down the hill with him, endeavoring to repress her terror and to think with rapidity and accuracy.

"You never knew any one by the name of Harry Vennor in Santa Fe?" he queried, his thoughts recurring to his son.

"I knew a Talbott Vennor!" she answered.

"Who?"

"A Talbott Vennor."

She saw that his face had suddenly grown ashy.

"Tell me about him!" he said. "That is my name!"

He looked little enough like the Talbott Vennor of the Arcade, and into her mind rushed all the things she had heard as well as surmised.

Before she could speak further an Indian got up from beside a rock a few feet in advance of them, whom she knew.

This Indian was Juan Tinto, and, on recognizing her, his face assumed a haughty and dignified look.

"Juan Tinto!" she exclaimed, stopping and staring at him.

"Yes, it's Juan Tinto," he assured, coming toward her. "You know me, do you? You have seen me?"

"At the Arcade," she replied. "You came there more than once."

She might have added that she had overheard him, as well as seen him, in a certain private room of the Arcade, when he met and conversed with Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor.

But she did not put this into words, and only eyed him anxiously.

Talbott Vennor drew back and stood meekly aside, as Juan Tinto approached her.

Although Juan Tinto was trying very hard to be stern and dignified, he found it difficult, for he knew that many suspicious and unkindly Pueblo eyes were on him.

Juan Tinto's life had been most unpleasant since his Pueblo brethren had discovered his two-facedness and perfidy. Not only had his reputation been badly shattered, but his life had been in peril.

This was in his mind now, and it did not tend to make him feel at ease.

"Why has the white girl come here?" he asked, fiercely staring at her.

"I did not mean to come here," she replied. "I wanted to go to Santa Fe. If you will put me on the trail to Santa Fe I will leave at once."

"And not come back?"

"And not come back!"

"And you will never speak of what you have seen here?"

He saw her hesitation.

"You would but lie if I let you go on," he said. "You would bring the son of this man here and the Pueblos would have trouble and war with the whites!"

"Did I not tell you my son is in Santa Fe?" Vennor triumphantly ejaculated. "He is there now, is he not, Juan Tinto?"

"She knows him well enough!" declared Tinto. "She only pretends that she does not. She knows him well, for she saved his life!"

"Halcyon Hal!" she ejaculated. "Is that the man you mean? His name is Harry Vane!"

Vennor seemed to forget the presence of Juan Tinto and of the other Pueblos, who were constantly drawing nearer.

"It must be my son," he exclaimed. "Tell me about him."

"If that is your son, then I have seen him often, and I will tell you all I know about him. You spoke the truth, did you, Juan Tinto?"

"Bah!" and Tinto showed his disgust. "Why play the snake with the forked tongue? Do you not know all these things yourself? Did you not come here because you knew these things?"

He was sure, apparently, that her coming concerned the prisoner, that she had come to bring about his release, and that she had come at the instigation of the sport.

It was very natural that Juan Tinto should think thus.

He was resolved to thwart these plans, if she held them.

The other Pueblos were now quite near, ringing in the trio.

"You are the prisoners of the Pueblos," Tinto announced, in a voice intended to

be heard by his brother-villagers. "You will go on in front of us to the town."

He spoke authoritatively.

This assumption of power was not a piece of wisdom, if Juan Tinto had but known it. In the eyes of his countrymen modesty more became him. They did not forget that he had offered to sell them out.

"Juan Tinto is puffing himself out like an adder," one of them remarked, and, under this stinging blow, Tinto shrunk and cowered.

He lost his air of bluster, and, shortly after, dropped quietly behind, where he remained silent.

It was not possible for Bessie and Vennor to continue their talk, hedged about by these Indians.

Bessie's mental anguish was intense. Just when she felt that she had regained her freedom, she had stumbled into the midst of these Indians, who, because they feared she would carry word of their other prisoner to Santa Fe, proposed to hold her also.

She looked at Juan Tinto and wondered what effect an offer of a bribe would have on him. Her watch was concealed in her dress. The opportunity might come for her to give it to him in return for her liberty.

A number of Indians came out from the pueblo—men, women and children—and they all crowded about the prisoners, talking excitedly and gesticulating in an unheard-of manner.

Bessie Brandon was very much afraid of them. She had been told that the Pueblos were peaceful and industrious, but she could get no such assurance out of the dark faces that surrounded her. They were Indian faces, and she thought they looked malevolent.

She ran her eyes from one to the other, searching for some gleam of sympathy. At last, in some of the faces of the women she fancied there were looks of pity, if not of kindness.

"I will try some of those women," she thought, her mind still on the watch.

Then the pueblo itself was gained and they were driven into the narrow streets and toward a forbidden-looking adobe.

She could hardly repress a shudder of fear as the Indians closed about her. Their shrill cries filled her ears.

"Have courage!" Vennor whispered, as he observed her shrinking manner.

The door of the 'doby was thrown open. "You go in there?" one of the Pueblos ordered.

She saw that the mud house was to be her prison.

She had only exchanged one prison for another.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LARIAT BILL SWINGS HIS ROPE.

The feelings of Lariat Bill and the sport were not of the pleasantest as they crouched in the hole beneath the cabin into which they had been thrust by Susan Crabtree.

When the board was dropped back into place and they heard the voice of Bob Brandon, they crawled softly away from the opening, and were surprised to note that there was a gleam of light ahead of them.

"It looks as if there is a way out of this thing," whispered Halcyon Hal.

"You bet there's a way out!" Lariat Bill returned, exultantly. "I tell you, that there woman is a hummer! Of course she knowed we could git out er she wouldn't 'a' put us down in hyer. Bob Brandon'll be investigatin' this place in about another minute, I calc'late."

With this he pushed on, moving as quietly as possible.

But a few moments were required to bring them to an opening like a coal-hole, through which they forced their way.

Then they stood erect in the darkness outside the cabin and listened to the words of Bob Brandon.

It gave them an unpleasant start to know there was a bloodhound in the outlaw camp, which was to be set on their trail.

"I'm not so much afeared of the dog

myself, but I will get Susan into trouble," was the cowboy's apprehensive statement.

However, they could do nothing but trust the matter to the future, and hope that Susan Crabtree would be equal to every emergency that might arise. She had shown herself to be a very clear-headed and courageous woman.

As it did not seem wise to linger, they hurried away from the house and from the vicinity of the cabin, intending to reach the pass by making a wide detour.

But they had not gone a hundred yards when the deep baying of the hound was heard.

The dog had been put on the trail at the point where they had encountered and captured Peg-leg Hamil.

They stopped and listened to the brute in some dismay.

"He's tearin' right along toward the house where we met Susan!" the cowboy ejaculated.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the dog changed its course and seemed to be coming toward them.

Then they recollected that they had crossed their own trail, and they knew that, at the junction of the trails, the dog had taken the fresher one.

Susan Crabtree was safe!

Bill Larkins felt for the rope that swung at his belt, while Halcyon Hal nervously fingered a revolver.

The rope on which the cowboy's fingers closed was not the one he had carried from Santa Fe. That had been taken from him by the outlaws. This one had been constructed out of the remnant of rope that was about his neck when he escaped from them.

It was a very weak thing, for a riata, though it might be made of use in his skillful hands.

"We'd better run for it," he whispered. "The dog ain't comin' overly fast. We're so near to them outlaws that some of 'em may be on our backs before we know it while we're fightin' him!"

He took the rope from his belt, and, swinging it in his hand, he ran on out toward the rim of the crater, closely followed by the sport.

They could tell that the camp was in an uproar of excitement. Shouts and commands reached them. Men were scattering in all directions to hunt them down.

They could not deny to themselves that they were in a ticklish position. So far as they knew, there was but one outlet to the camp, and that was by the path, or creek, which was guarded.

The yelp of the dog only sounded at intervals now, and he seemed to be somewhat in advance of the men.

When about half the distance to the pass had been covered, Lariat Bill wheeled about, and stood, with the lariat in his hand, ready for a throw.

In spite of their best efforts, the dog had gained on them. He was very close. They could hear his leaps and his panting growls, though they could not see him.

"Stand by to knife him, whether I miss or whether I don't!" Lariat Bill admonished. "I don't doubt he's a bloody customer. Don't do any shootin' unless you have to."

He had not time to say more. The dog could now be seen, as well as heard.

When within a dozen feet, and he saw that the men were standing at bay, he halted for a moment, and the eyes he fixed on them glowed like coals.

Then he uttered a hoarse growl and sprang forward with tremendous bounds, and, as he did so, Lariat Bill's rope met him and caught him about the neck.

It tightened with a jerk that threw him from his feet, and choked the yelp that he tried to utter.

The skillful cowboy gave it another twist, drawing it tighter still, and he yanked it so hard that the dog could not get up.

The sounds of the struggle were subdued, and did not reach the outlaws, who were some distance away, hurrying in that direction.

Halcyon Hal was about to use his knife on the dog, but, before he could do so, the knife of the cowboy flashed out. It did its work.

Five minutes later the foremost of the outlaws came on the dog and discovered what had been done.

Then his calls went up in warning to those following him, and to those guarding the outlet from the camp.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

The fugitives knew that there were horses in the crater near some of the water-holes of the creek. They had seen the horses there when they had surveyed the camp from the hills, and they had closely studied their location.

So to this point Lariat Bill and the sport now turned.

They had seen a log stable, in which, they presumed, saddles and bridles and ropes were kept, if not horses.

Running down to the dry creek bed, they kept warily along it, watching for this stable, and also keeping a sharp lookout for enemies.

They could hear the outlaws who had gathered about the dead bloodhound.

Their plan was to secure a pair of horses and make the dash through the pass on horseback.

It was a daring and original plan, and seemed full of danger. However, they did not think its danger as great as that which would attend an attempt to steal through the pass on foot.

Warned and watchful as the outlaws were, they felt that the latter could hardly be done. The peril of discovery would be very great.

"Here she is!" Lariat announced, when a low, log building loomed before them. "Now, if they haven't thought to set a guard hyer!"

They could hear some ponies moving about in a corral, but nowhere could they discover a guard.

Lariat Bill found the door of the stable and entered, revolver in hand.

He stopped within the entrance, and listened cautiously.

A horse snorted uneasily near him, but there was no other indication of life.

He felt along the walls, and found saddles and bridles and ropes in abundance.

He discovered, too, that there were four horses in the stable.

"Come in hyer and make a pick," he whispered. "Horseflesh a plenty! Don't hear anybody a-comin', eh?"

"Some of them are moving down the creek," the sport replied, appearing at the cowboy's elbow. "You take the first horse and I'll take the next. Where are the things?"

"Right hyer," said Lariat, lifting a saddle from its peg, together with a lasso. "Slap 'em on lively. Every minute counts!"

The sport realized this full well, and so rapidly did they both work that in a very short time the horses were in readiness and were led from the stable.

Several outlaws were plainly to be heard, coming down the creek, as they swung into their saddles.

Their courage gained in strength a hundred fold with these horses beneath them, and, as they turned toward the pass, and rode slowly and quietly along, they felt that their escape was assured.

"We'll ride 'em down!" the cowboy gritted, referring to the guards supposed to be in the pass. "We'll jump on 'em like a whirlwind, and they won't know who or what we air until we're gone!"

Even as he said it, he forced his horse into a gallop, and, this being imitated by the sport, they swept toward the pass at a swinging gallop.

Both drew their revolvers, and Lariat Bill, skilled cowboy that he was, took the reins in his teeth.

He sat his horse like a figure in bronze, guiding it by the reins and by the pressure of his knees.

The guards in the pass heard them coming, but whether they guessed the character of the comers could not be known. Very likely they did not give the sport and the cowboy credit for such daring and shrewdness.

In another minute the horsemen were in

the pass, which was merely the dry bed of the creek, forming a sandy path, made perilous by water-holes.

Then they became aware that the guards were also mounted.

A roar of surprise and rage broke from the lips of the mounted guards, for they knew now that the two horsemen were none other than Lariat Bill and the Spangled Sport.

Lariat Bill dropped one of his pistols back into a pocket and clutched his lasso. Then he crowded his horse toward the nearest outlaw, as if to ride him down, and let the rope fly.

It was a furious onset. The rope dragged the man from the saddle, and, as the other outlaws attempted to close around the daring cowboy, Halcyon Hal began to work his revolver.

Lariat Bill let the lasso go, for he did not care to drag the man to death; and, when Hal, after a fierce dash, reached his side, they plunged together toward the horsemen who still barred the way.

These gave back in dismay. One of them was overturned by Lariat Bill's rush, and the other seemed only anxious to get out of the path.

The whole thing was over in less than a minute, and Lariat Bill and the sport were out of the pass, and flying across the hills.

They had given the outlaws the slip!

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN ASTONISHING CAPTURE.

Lariat Bill knew the country well, and through this knowledge was able to baffle the outlaws.

When they came back into the direct route to Santa Fe, after a considerable detour, the outlaws had been so distanced and befogged that our friends felt no fear of further pursuit.

They were congratulating themselves on their successful escape and planning a course of action, when they heard what were unmistakably hoof-strokes some distance in advance.

"Somebody's moseyin' along there!" said Lariat, drawing rein to listen. "It's a little pony, and not a very heavy rider. I can tell that by the sound."

The noise of the hoof-strokes confirmed his surmises. They were evidently made by a pony moving at a gentle canter.

"I allow that whoever is on that nag hain't heard us," Lariat averred. "Wouldn't move along so quiet like, if we'd been heard. They ain't any too many people comin' and goin' in these hills!"

They were five or six miles from the crater camp, and both wondered if the rider could be a member of the outlaw band. It was quite possible.

"We'll find out," declared the cowboy, "if we can get near enough."

They soon saw, however, that they could not do this without alarming the person in advance, and, as no other course presented, they urged their horses into a brisk canter and speedily lessened the distance.

The sky was much lighter than when they were in the camp of the outlaws. Some of the clouds had rolled away, and it seemed that the moon was about to rise, so that when they came in sight of the rider they could see that it was a woman.

They were intensely astonished by this. The last thing they had expected to see was a woman riding through those New Mexican hills at that hour of the night. There were no ranches near from which she might have come, and she had no escort.

Their advance seemed to frighten her. She looked quickly over her shoulder and urged her pony into a speedier gait. But he was a short-legged thing, though an easy rider, and had no chance in a race with the horses.

The pursuers felt just a little bit sneaking as they chased the woman in that manner and so evidently terrified her, but they were resolved to know who and what she was.

Therefore the cowboy and the sport

drove their steeds on until they were at the woman's side.

The cowboy reached out his hand and took the pony by the bridle.

As he did so, the woman threw up her right hand and a pistol spouted fire, its ball cutting a hole through the cowboy's hat.

"Drop it!" he hissed, with sudden savagery, for the call had been too uncomfortably close. "No tricks like that now!"

She seemed about to fire again, when the sport knocked the pistol from her hand.

The pony wheeled half round, with a leaping motion, and, when they got a look into the woman's face, they uttered exclamations of astonishment.

It was Ina Brandon!

"Good God!" was the cowboy's exclamation. "Why, confound it, I beg pardon! But, the truth is, I wasn't expectin' to meet you! And hanged if I can imagine now what you're doin' hyer!"

She was angered and annoyed, as well as frightened.

"Is that the way men, who claim to be gentlemen, treat ladies?"

"Well, no, begging pardon, I can't say that it is!"

"We didn't know who you were, of course," put in the sport. "You see, we could hardly expect to find you here. You will gratify our curiosity by telling us what you are doing out here?"

"When you show me that it's any of your business," she snapped. "What are you doing out here? I've as much right to ask as you have."

"I think I could guess," he avowed.

"Guess, then! I'm not caring what you guess!"

"You've been to the outlaw camp in the crater valley?"

They could see that the shot took effect.

"You see, I know all about it," he continued, not giving her time to reply.

"We've been there ourselves. We're just from there. You left before we did, and you're going to Santa Fe!"

Her surprised air assured him that he was guessing with remarkable accuracy.

"Of course we didn't go in as friends of the outlaws. We slipped in, and we slipped out, bringing these horses with us, after a lively chase!"

She seemed unable to frame a reply. She was much puzzled by what he said. She had been to the outlaw camp, and she was on her way to Santa Fe.

"Come, now," he urged, "assure me that my words are true, at any rate."

"I don't have to tell anything, and I won't tell anything!"

"Oh, you won't, hey?" interjected Lariat Bill, again gripping the rein, for he thought she might try to dash away. "I reckon, now, if the court knows itself, you will!"

"Climb down, Halcyon, and git that little joker that you bounced out of her hand!"

The sport swung out of his saddle, picked up the little revolver, and gave it to the cowboy.

"You see this hyer?" said Lariat, cocking it and pointing it at her. "I reckon you know there's ca'tridges in it, fer you must 'a' put 'em in! You fired one at me a little while ago! When a woman gits to ridin' through the hills at this time o' night, carryin' loaded pistols and firin' 'em, she can expect to answer any proper questions that put to her!"

"If she don't, I reckon there's a way to make her!"

She recoiled in evident fright and put up her hands.

"You wouldn't do that!" was her assertion, though it was not strongly made.

"Wouldn't I? Well, I don't know, now, if you refuse to answer the questions that this gentleman asks you."

"All that I said was true. Wasn't it?" Halcyon Hal demanded.

"Ye-s," she stammered.

"And why did you go there, and why are you now going away?"

"It doesn't concern you—indeed it doesn't!"

"We'll hear it, and judge about that ourselves."

She did not answer, and he prompted her.

"It was because Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor are there, was it not?"

There was the faintest of affirmatives.

"And you're going to Santa Fe on some errand for them?"

"No, I am not," she flashed.

"Why, then?"

"Because I wanted to get away from there."

"You did not like their company?"

"I wanted to get away from Talbott Vennor!"

"Oh!"

"I hate him!" she hissed.

The fire of jealousy was in her tones.

The cowboy and his young pard exchanged significant glances. The truth had come to them like a flash. Ina Brandon was bitterly and jealously angry at Talbott Vennor because he had been making love to Bessie Brandon instead of to her!

The chances are that if Talbott Vennor had endeavored to lay siege to her heart Ina Brandon would have spurned him. It is likely she did not care anything for him, but the mere fact that Bessie Brandon was preferred irritated her. It seemed an indication that she was inferior, in Vennor's eyes, to her cousin.

"Why do you hate Talbott Vennor?" the sport persuasively queried.

"That's none of your business!"

"Well, you said your present trip to Santa Fe was not being made for him. Does he think it is?"

Again he saw that his question, fired almost at random, had found a target.

"I know you made him think you were going there to help him in some way!" with growing confidence. "But you were really going, like us, to reveal the position of the camp to his enemies."

Here the sport made an inexcusable slip. He should have kept his own intentions to himself while worming hers from her.

She became evasive. Probably she was beginning to have less fear of the threatening pistol, and was reaching the opinion that the cowboy would not shoot, whatever she said or did. At any rate, she would not further enlighten the sport.

"Well, you can tell us, at least, where Bessie Brandon is. I am sure you know."

"I don't know," she asserted, though there was a ring of insincerity in the declaration. "She went East, as I told you at the Arcade. I presume she is on her way, if she has not reached her destination."

"You don't presume anything of the kind!" with some harshness. "You know she didn't go East. You know she was taken from Santa Fe by her enemies—or, rather, by my enemies."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Why are you making this trip, in the night? Aren't you afraid?"

He saw it was useless to question her further concerning Bessie, and it did not seem to matter, as they already possessed information showing that Bessie was held in the Barrancas Mine.

"If you know as much as you say you do, which I am inclined to doubt, you know that it isn't considered advisable for any one to enter or leave the camp in the daytime," she answered. "Besides, I'm not afraid. I never met any men yet who had so little of the gentleman in their make-up as to treat me as you have done!"

It was a spiteful stab, and went home, though the sport managed to conceal his confusion in the darkness.

"I 'low we're jist wastin' time hyer," avowed the cowboy uneasily. "I guess that all she knows don't amount to much. I say, let her go on."

"Is it wise?" the sport queried.

"Hain't nothin' else to be done that I can see. We might tie her up!"

"We'll let you go," said Hal, speaking to her. "We have not injured you, and I hope you have no unfriendly feelings toward us!"

They could see that she was eager to go, and, as soon as Lariat Bill took his hand off her bridle rein and she felt that she was at liberty to depart, she did so, without a moment's delay.

"Glad to get away from us," declared

the sport, looking after her. "I suppose it was the only thing we could do, though I doubt its wisdom. If she goes straight on to Santa Fe, though, I guess she can't hurt our plans!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WOMAN'S SPITE.

It was a mistake for Lariat Bill and the sport to release Ina Brandon.

She was spiteful and treacherous, and studied, even while they were questioning her, how she might avenge her fancied insults and get even with them and with Bessie, whom she hated like a snake.

She disliked Talbott Vennor, but she disliked the sport more. There had been a time, not so many days or hours previous, when she had thought to win the sport's attention.

Instead, that attention had been given to Bessie.

She was reasonably sure of the plans of the sport and the cowboy. She had closely watched their manner and words while they were talking to her. She was a keen and shrewd observer, and she knew, almost as well as if she had been told, that they intended to try to release Bessie Brandon from her prison in the Barrancas Mine.

She knew that Bessie was held a captive there, though she had denied positive knowledge of Bessie's whereabouts. She had noted the tone of the sport while he was questioning about Bessie, and that tone had assured her of the fact that the sport had obtained information concerning Bessie's imprisonment.

Therefore, she did not ride a great distance on the way to Santa Fe, but wheeled her pony about, when she felt safe to do so, and turned back toward the crater camp.

The rage in her jealous heart grew hotter as the distance between herself and these enemies increased.

"He shall not have her!" she muttered, over and over. "They are crazy in love with each other, and they must be kept apart. I'd rather have her marry Talbott Vennor than him."

She made such good time across the hills that, at the expiration of an hour, she was in front of the pass.

She knew it was guarded, and she called aloud to the sentinels, in dread of a shot.

"It is I," she cried, "Ina Brandon! I want to come in!"

One man was heard whispering to his comrades, and then he came out toward her, with his rifle slung across his arm in readiness. He was half afraid of a trick, but her words reassured him as he drew near.

"I suppose you've got a password, but I don't know anything about it. Mr. Brandon did not give it to me, for I did not expect to come back. I started for Santa Fe, you know?"

The man came close up to her and peered into her face.

"I reckon it's all right," was his declaration. "But, jist the same, I can't let anybody pass without orders. We've been havin' a bit of a skeer!"

He was inclined to be extra cautious, for his ears still tingled with the denunciations of Bob Brandon and Talbott Vennor. He had been one of the guards who had permitted the intruders to enter and pass out of the valley.

"But I don't want to wait here," Ina urged. "Can't you take me to Mr. Brandon? He'll say it's all right."

"One of the boys has gone for him. He'll be here in a minute, likely. You can walk your horse a little closer, if you like, so as to be nearer when he comes. It's all right, I don't doubt, and he'll let you in; but I has to be keerful!"

Ina Brandon grumblingly walked her pony along until the mouth of the pass was gained.

Then there were a stir and some words, and Bob Brandon came forward.

His exclamations indicated his surprise. "I thought it best to return," she explained. "I'll tell you all about it as soon as we get inside."

Brandon saw that she was much agi-

tated, so he took hold of the bridle rein and led her pony through the pass and on into the camp, and, as they proceeded, she told him what had occurred out in the hills.

"I'm glad you came back, Ina. You're a girl to tie to! If Bessie was only of your sort, now! Vennor and the other boys will be glad to hear what you've got to say. We've been talking things over and have been muddled as to what we ought to do."

He called to a man to come and care for the pony, and then he assisted Ina to alight and led the way into one of the larger cabins.

A half-dozen men were in there, chief of whom was the false Talbott Vennor.

Vennor and his comrades stared at Ina in undisguised amazement.

"She's got something to say, let's hear it," said Brandon.

It made her feel queer to be the cynosure of all eyes, and to feel that her message was of such importance to this band of outlaws.

Ina Brandon was as unscrupulous as any road-agent there. Had she been a man she would, in all probability, have been numbered among them, as it was she was accounted by them worthy to know and share in their secrets.

Standing in their midst, she told of her encounter with Lariat Bill and the sport, and repeated, so far as she could, the words uttered by them.

Her conclusion was the conclusion of her hearers: All agreed that the cowboy and the sport were going to the Barrancas Mine with the intention of effecting Bessie's rescue.

"But it can't be done!" Vennor declared, smiling mysteriously. "Get up, Bob, and tell your story!"

A man had come in during Bob Brandon's absence, a man who, having the password, and being well known, had passed the guards without any trouble.

Bob Lacy got on his feet with an awkward shuffle, and pulled at the waistband of his trousers.

"The gal's gone!"

This was his announcement, and it brought a shade of pallor to Brandon's tanned cheeks.

For this Bob Lacy was none other than the guard who had been set to watch the prison of Bessie Brandon—the man she had seen hovering in the hills and watching her so closely.

"Yes, she is gone!" he continued; "and it wasn't no fault o' mine, neither. She found a false door in that there prison, and she got out by it. How was I to know there was sich a thing?"

With this as an introduction and apology, Lacy plunged into a recital of how he had found the prison empty, and of the manner in which the prisoner escaped.

He had followed her through the underground passage, and, with the coming of day, had trailed her to the Pueblo village, and there, by keeping a careful watch, he had discovered that she was held, with Talbott Vennor.

This simple narrative was enough to create intense interest.

"It will knock the plans of Lariat Bill and Halcyon Hal into pi!" the false Vennor chucklingly asserted. "They're headed for the Barrancas Mine, you know, and when they get there they'll not find any girl there, and they won't know what has become of her!"

The information brought by Ina and by Bob Lacy necessitated the formation of new plans of action, and when Ina had been complimented and lauded, she was sent out of the house, and the outlaws drew closer together.

"I think the time has come," said Brandon, "for making the stroke we failed in before. What's to hinder us from trapping this sport and his cowboy friend and doing them up? And what's to hinder us from taking this Talbott Vennor out of the pueblo of Juarez and serving him the same way?"

He looked anxiously into the faces about him.

None realized better than he what was to be gained by such a consummation.

"Can it be done?" he was asked.

"That's what I want you to say. I believe it can, myself."

"We might trap them at the mine. But how are you going to get that fellow in the pueblo?"

"Capture it!" was the sententious declaration. "Tear it down over the Indians' heads!"

There was a breathless silence following this. The thing proposed was daring and dangerous. Such an attack on the pueblo of Juarez could not be made without creating a stir throughout New Mexico and the Southwest. A thousand men—white men—might rise up to avenge the injury.

Vennor was thoughtful and seemed to hesitate about expressing an opinion. Finally he looked up.

"It's just the plan," he said. "We've got to do it. As long as these two men live there is no safety for any of us. I don't know that I'm in any more danger than the rest of you, even if I have taken that fellow's name. You share the profits of the mine, and you've seen to-night how daring that son of his is!"

It was a long speech, and it did not fail to make an impression.

"We'll take a vote on it," suggested Brandon, who did not desire to lead unless he had true and willing followers.

He tore some paper into slips and passed them around.

"Write your vote on that. 'Yes' or 'No.' 'Yes' means that we are to undertake the thing. Vote as you want to, so that we may know how we all stand."

There was a laying of heads together, followed by a scratching of pencils.

Brandon collected the slips and handed them to one of the men to read.

"We go!" the man announced. "It's six to four!"

Both Brandon and Vennor got on their feet, and their faces showed that, while they were relieved, they were yet very anxious. There was no telling how the thing might terminate. Very likely there would be some dead men among their number before it was over.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SEEKING TO ESCAPE.

Bessie Brandon could have cried her heart out when she was thrust into the adobe prison in the Pueblo village and left there to her own musings.

A cruel fate seemed to dog her footsteps. She had been torn from her home in Santa Fe by a father who had no fatherly affection for her, and, in trying to escape from him, she had plunged into this snare.

Yet she soon found that she was to have more liberty here than at the Barrancas Mine.

The door of the adobe hut opened and a Pueblo woman made her appearance. She had a timid look and kind, dark eyes, and Bessie was drawn to her.

The woman could not speak English very well, but she contrived, by a combination of words and signs, to let Bessie know that, while she was her jailer, she was also her sympathizer.

She informed Bessie that she might walk out on the hills as much as she desired, but that she must not try to get away; that it would be of no use for her to try, for some one would be always watching her, and her efforts at escaping, if she made any, would only make her lot the harder.

Bessie put some deft questions, and then exhibited the gold watch, but the woman only shook her head. She did not appear to be offended, but she would not be bribed.

Finding that it was useless to make any further ventures in that direction, Bessie deemed it best to graciously accept any good things thrown in her way, and walked out through the narrow streets of the village to the hillside.

She noticed that she was much stared at from the roofs of the buildings, and that those watchful Pueblo children were observing her from a respectful distance.

They continued in sight, but did not approach her.

She was thinking about Talbott Vennor and his strange declaration, when she saw him rise up before her from beside a rock. He had evidently been waiting for and expecting her appearance.

"I'm glad you came out," he said, in his earnest way. "I was afraid you would not come. I want to talk to you about my son. So you have really seen him and talked with him? Do you know that seems so strange to me?"

His eyes were shining brightly, and there was a flush on his cheeks. His manner was agitated.

Bessie's heart was filled with sympathy for this unfortunate man, whose fate had been so hard.

The knowledge that he was the father of Halcyon Hal, whom she loved, deeply increased her interest and sympathy.

So she told him all she knew of Halcyon Hal, and he listened with a quiet and pathetic patience.

"If he only knew I was here he would get me out, some way!" was his declaration. "But he don't know! He don't know! And he goes by the name of Harry Vane?"

He would not listen to the suggestion that Harry Vane might not be his son, Harry Vennor, even though the description given by Bessie of Harry Vane's personal appearance so differed from his recollection of his son.

Of course, the clothing was not the same, and Harry Vennor was not, professionally, a sport.

But then, as Harry Vane had an abundance of quiet work to perform and many enemies to encounter, there was justification of an assumption of a new name and a change of attire and calling.

"Do you not think we can get away?" Bessie inquired, recurring to the subject that was so much in her mind. "We are watched, I know, but don't you think we might slip out at night?"

He shook his head negatively, then replied:

"If you can hit on a plan which I have not tried! I haven't much faith in our ability to do anything, but I won't say that I'm not willing to try, if the right kind of an opportunity offers!"

"I am doing some thinking," she announced. "I want to study the village before I make any plan, but I'm going to get away from here!"

This firm determination did not abate in the least when she went back to the pueblo. She studied the dusty, narrow streets and the ugly mud walls in hope of a suggestion.

But none came, and, when she retired within her doory prison, her heart was faint.

She began to fear that the fate of Talbott Vennor was to be hers; that she was doomed to an interminable imprisonment in the pueblo.

She sobbed herself into a half-sleep, from which, far in the night, she was aroused.

There was a scratching sound, issuing from the walls, apparently.

She got up and approached the door.

The noise came again and was followed by words:

"Are you awake, Miss Brandon?"

They were spoken by the old man.

Her pulses bounded under the influence of sudden excitement.

"Fully awake!" she replied. "What is it?"

She heard the bar of the door removed, then the door slowly moved and his form was dimly to be seen.

"I found a way open to-night!" he whispered, reaching out to take her hand. "Let me help you! We must hurry! There's something going on that makes the Pueblos less wide awake than usual."

"I came on the woman who was watching you, and tied her, before she could cry out. I hated to do it, for she is a good woman, but it had to be done! Now, follow me!"

She came through the doorway and he closed the door behind her.

"It would attract attention, open!" he quietly explained. "Come! We must hurry!"

He held her hand, and she obediently went along by his side.

The streets were silent and seemingly deserted.

Their hopes began to rise, but at this juncture a couple of Pueblos were seen coming in their direction.

"This way!" he whispered. "They have not caught sight of us yet!"

He drew her swiftly and silently after him until they reached an adobe building, whose staring mud walls, windowless and doorless, faced on the little street.

A rude ladder clung against this building.

"Follow me!" he whispered, and then ran up the ladder as lightly as a cat.

His agility was surprising.

She instantly followed, and when she reached the roof he assisted her, and, a minute later, they crouched together on top of the house.

The roof was as flat as a floor, and was of mud cemented over some beams. Apparently, the house was unoccupied.

The Pueblos they had seen advancing did not even look in their direction, but hurried by as if in great haste.

"There's some trouble brewing to-night!" Vennor whispered. "I have never known them to act so before. They haven't given us any attention, hardly, since dark."

"What do you suppose it is?"

"I don't know. If they were at war with the Apaches or the Navajos I should think a raid was feared."

He was so certain, however, that nothing of the kind was to be apprehended, that he refused to attribute the strangeness of the Pueblo demeanor that night to such a fear.

He was crouching low on the roof as he spoke and feeling about with his hands. But presently he half uplifted himself and showed a club.

He had pulled it from among the beams and the cross-pieces constituting the support of the mud roof. In a pinch it might be made a formidable weapon.

When they had watched and listened for five minutes without seeing or hearing anything to cause further apprehension, they climbed quietly down from the roof into the little street.

"Keep close at my side!" he warned. "I am resolved not to be taken, now. If we can't escape by running I shall try to fight our way out!"

He seemed a different man from the cowed prisoner she had first met. The change in his manner could not be attributed solely to the possession of the club. He had had many opportunities to obtain a similar weapon.

The spirit of freedom had been breathed anew into his veins, and perhaps largely through the coming of Bessie Brandon.

"I believe we are going to get away!" he whispered, with feverish eagerness. "Follow me, now, and be careful!"

They moved along close to the houses in the shadow of the wall, out toward the limits of the town.

The village seemed asleep or deserted, but they soon had proof that it was neither. The people in the queer houses were all wide awake. They seemed to be mostly women and children, however. The men, particularly the younger and stronger ones, were not in the houses.

Vennor learned all this by careful listening and by mounting to a roof and examining one of the interiors.

He and Bessie crept on and on, their hopes growing.

Then a circle of fire flamed from the hillsides and terrific and savage yells rent the air.

"It's an attack of the Apaches!" he exclaimed, with a thrill of fear, clutching her hand.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ATTACK ON THE PUEBLO.

Those yells did not come from the throats of Apaches, however. They were uttered by members of the hooded band, though the intention was to make the Pueblos believe them made by Apaches.

Desperate as were the outlaws, they had not thought it safe to make this at-

tack without attempts at concealment, and, as the Apaches were hereditary enemies of the Pueblos, they disguised themselves as Apaches.

A casual glance at any one of the outlaws would have led the beholder to think a feathered warrior of the Apache nation was before him. The garb, the feathers, and the paint, were all in imitation of the Apaches.

Even the keen-eyed Pueblos had been fooled.

The outlaws had attempted to sneak into the Pueblo village, after making a near approach, but the vigilance of the Pueblos had thwarted the design.

It was this discovery of the nearness of the supposed Apaches which had caused the singular conduct noticed by Vennor, and which he so remarked on.

There was not a better fighter among the Pueblos than Juan Tinto, and the very circumstances of the case forced him to the front, even though he was under the displeasure of his people.

He gladly welcomed the responsibility thus thrust on him. It offered an opportunity to redeem his reputation.

Besides, he was as much interested as any in repulsing their bloodthirsty foes; for his home and all he had were there.

Therefore, when the shrill cries of the disguised outlaws sounded and the fire of the rifles cut the air, Juan Tinto put himself at the head of his fellow villagers to repulse the assault.

They had weapons, though these were of an inferior character. They could boast a few muskets and a limited supply of ammunition, but their other weapons were bows and arrows, lances and clubs, sticks and stones.

In the very nature of things, it was hardly possible for them to successfully resist an attack made by desperate and well-armed white men.

Vennor and Bessie Brandon stood quite still, terrified by that outburst. They shrunk against the buildings, as if to shield themselves from the bullets that hurtled up the street.

"We cannot go on!" Bessie insisted. "Let us turn back!"

"And be shot down while we are doing it! No, we'll stay here! Squeeze into this hole by me, and maybe a chance will come for us!"

It was a jut-off in the walls, a mere crevice, but it offered needed shelter, and they squeezed into it.

The yells rose loudly, and were answered by Juan Tinto and his followers in a manner that seemed quite as fierce.

"There will be a dreadful fight, and massacre, likely!" Vennor panted, peering out to get a view of the combatants. "This is awful! If there were no women and children in here!"

The bullets continued to fly up the streets, and the rifles to belch fire on the hillsides, and the pretended Apaches to yell.

Then a sweeping charge, in which Apaches and Pueblos seemed indiscriminately mingled, drove by them.

Bessie closed her eyes in terror, but Vennor only crowded closer into the crevice and clutched his club.

Pueblos and Apaches went down in the dust, some of them never to rise again.

It was a thrilling, as well as fear-inspiring, scene.

Juan Tinto retreated slowly, wielding a clubbed musket. His braided hair hung down on his shoulders, his blanket was half torn from him, and his right cheek had been gashed by a bullet.

He fought every inch of the ground, holding his own like a hero, and determined not to yield.

He was doing very much to redeem himself in the eyes of his people. He was really no coward. His courage was of stern fiber, and it never showed to better advantage.

One of the pretended Apaches rushed on him, and, as he came near, threw up a rifle and fired.

But, at the critical moment, Tinto knocked the rifle aside by a blow of the musket, and the bullet sped harmlessly into the air.

Then Tinto struck again, tearing the rifle out of the man's hand, but the blow

also forced the musket out of his own hands, and the two confronted each other, armed only with knives.

"Dog of a white man!" Tinto howled. "You think to fool me! I know you!"

His rage passed all bounds. He knew, in that moment, if he did not know before, that the pretended Apaches were white men disguised, and very probably he guessed the real reason of the attack.

He drew his knife and leaped, with a panther-like bound, on his foe, and tried to bear him back and deliver a fatal blow.

But the white man was equal to the emergency. His knife came out and met Tinto's, and the blades flashed fire.

Each realized that it was a duel to the death, and they began to circle warily and to watch for an opening.

Tinto was the quicker and readier, and he went round and round his antagonist, making feint after feint, trying to draw in return.

Talbott Vennor crouched low and clung to his club, while he stared, with starting eyes, on the scene which was being enacted before him.

He heard Tinto denounce his adversary as a dog of a white man. The words were a revelation; but, watching the pretended Apache, he was willing to believe, with Tinto, that the man was a white man.

The thing puzzled Vennor greatly, until the truth came upon him like a flash of light.

These men were of his enemies. They were seeking his life, even more than the lives of the Pueblos. Ay, they had made this attack for the sole purpose of bringing about his death.

Was not the realization enough to thrill him and make him sick and faint?

He felt that, when the Pueblos had been conquered, the village would be searched for him, for the purpose of giving him up to death. Every house and street, every niche and crevice, would be mercilessly ransacked.

But he was not permitted to dwell on these thoughts. The fight before him drew his mind.

He saw Tinto circling like a hawk. In and out, Tinto darted, cleverly evading each blow aimed at him, and striking back. More than once his blade drew blood. Once the pretended Apache uttered a bitter English oath, and staggered as if about to fall.

It was probably but a clever ruse, to draw Tinto within reach of his arm.

It was successful. Tinto, deceived and made less cautious, flew in to deliver a finishing blow, and, as he did so, the blade of the outlaw was buried in his chest, and Tinto staggered back, mortally wounded.

The outlaw beat him down, with a deep curse, and then bounded over him and on up the street.

Vennor saw Tinto fall, and knew that the moment had come for action.

He again took hold of Bessie's hand, and observed that it trembled and was cold.

"The way is clear," he whispered. "We must go. It is now or not at all."

"I am ready," she declared, with a firmness that astonished him.

She had seen the end of the fight between Tinto and the one she still thought an Apache. The sight had weakened, but it had not unnerved, her.

The street was deserted, save by those who had fallen.

Farther up, they heard the wild sounds of the combat that was still raging.

"Come!" he whispered again, and together they ran swiftly between the mud walls in which there was now no guard, until they gained the end of the street, and then they hurried into the shelter of the hills.

Behind them the fight continued. Tinto was dead, but his followers were not subdued. A new leader arose to command their movements.

A half-dozen of the outlaws had fallen. Others were sorely wounded. They began to weaken and waver.

The Pueblos observed this, and rallied for a last effort.

It was successful, and, after a futile resistance, the outlaws were driven from the village, and the victory that seemed within their grasp was snatched from them.

But the Pueblos had lost their prisoners.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ONE GOOD TURN GETS ANOTHER.

The cries of the combatants still resounded as Talbott Vennor and Bessie Brandon fled out from the village into the gloom of the hills.

It was Vennor's belief that the Pueblos would be defeated. However, he did not now so much fear a massacre as when he had thought the attacking party Apaches.

He knew the white men were after him—that is, he felt sure of it, which is the next thing to knowledge.

He was sure, also, that as soon as they had made a search of the pueblo, and failed to find him, they would push their search into the adjacent country. They must have known that he was in the pueblo at the time of the attack, and they would know he had escaped during the excitement.

He and Bessie missed the regular trail leading to Santa Fe—and likely would not have followed it if they had found it, because of the pursuit they feared—and struck somewhat aimlessly into the hills.

This was a perilous thing, unfamiliar as both were with the country. In the darkness of the night every hill seemed alike. There were no landmarks to guide, and a haze in the sky made it difficult to follow the stars.

"Santa Fe must lie off in that direction," said Bessie, as they mounted to the crest of a cedar-clad ridge.

They had stopped for a few moments to rest, and were ready to go on.

Vennor was so uncertain of the right direction that he was willing to accept her suggestions.

When they descended into the valley they stopped in sudden fear, for they heard a horseman coming toward them.

The horse was not moving fast, and seemed to be tired.

"It can't be a Pueblo or one of those pretended Apaches," Vennor thought.

But in this he was mistaken. It was both Pueblo and pretended Apache!

It will be remembered that Vennor had bound the woman who had acted as guard over Bessie's prison, and that he left her thus bound after accomplishing Bessie's rescue.

The position of this helpless Pueblo woman was terrifying in the extreme, as the furious charge and countercharge rolled by her up the street.

She lay in the shadow of a mud wall, unable to move, and in danger of being trodden under foot by friend and foe alike.

She strove with desperation to tear the bonds from her wrists and the gag from her mouth and fly from the spot, but she was like the helpless paralytic who sees all and knows all, and yet can neither speak nor move.

The yells of the Pueblos rang in her ears triumphantly as they finally drove the outlaws before them like scattered sheep.

Resolved to gain the notice of her friends, she rolled farther out into the street, but soon found that, by so doing, she had made her condition worse.

An outlaw who had gained his horse and had charged boldly back to assist his fellows, beheld her.

He had returned too late to be of help to his friends. In another moment he would be surrounded, as he knew. The helpless Pueblo squaw attracted his attention, and, with the quickness of practiced hands, he threw her across the saddle in front of him, and, mounting, rode through the street, overturning all who sought to stop him.

It was the tramp of the hoofs of the horse of this outlaw which Bessie Brandon and Talbott Vennor heard, and which caused them to halt and question.

Vennor drew Bessie into the shelter of

a tall bunch of sage and both peered out in much anxiety.

The horseman came into view. Dim as was the light, the bound form of the woman was visible on the shoulders of the horse.

Bessie shuddered as she faintly discerned the painted face and feathered headdress behind the woman.

Then a sob, that was imaginary or real, reached her ears.

"It is terrible!" she whispered. "Oh, if you only had some weapon—something!"

Both saw that the painted villain would pass within a foot of their hiding-place.

The rider had drawn the horse into a walk, and seemed paying no more attention to the burden before him than if it were a chunk of wood.

Vennor began to tremble as the horse came near, and, when the outlaw was just in front of them and within easy reach, with a panther-like bound Vennor was upon him, swinging the heavy club.

A low cry of rage welled from his lips, but it was too late to avoid the blow. He swung half-round, and tried to get out one of his revolvers, but that terrible club beat down his arm and almost tumbled him from the saddle.

The arm hung helpless, as if broken, and Vennor swung the club again, as if to beat out the man's brains.

The outlaw struck instinctively spurs into his horse, and so saved himself from a second blow, but the quick movement of the horse threw the Pueblo woman to the ground.

The frightened and demoralized outlaw did not stop. He continued to spur the horse, and a half-dozen leaps carried him out of sight.

"We must get away from here," Vennor whispered, in much agitation. "He may be back directly."

The cords that held the woman's wrists and ankles were quickly loosened, and the Pueblo woman sat up.

"Come!" Vennor whispered, taking her hand and assisting her to rise. "We must go!"

He saw now that she was the woman he had tied, but that did not render him less kindly disposed.

She tore the gag out of her mouth and followed the two, without hesitation.

They did not halt until they had put a half-mile between themselves and the point where the outlaw had been encountered.

Then Vennor stopped and began to question the squaw.

"The Pueblos have won," was her answer, in signs as well as in words. "But you are not heading toward Santa Fe."

She pointed out the true direction.

"I will show you the way to the town."

And though she much wanted to return to the pueblo, she started to guide them toward the haven they sought.

CHAPTER XL.

PEG-LEG HAMIL REVEALS HIMSELF.

Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor proceeded to carry out their newly-formed plan without delay. A party of men disguised as Apaches—and this party consisted of almost the entire band—was sent against the pueblo of Juarez.

The other and much smaller party was led by Brandon and Vennor toward the Barrancas Mine.

They reckoned that Lariat Bill and the Spangled Sport had gone to the mine for the purpose of assisting Bessie, and, therefore, that the sport and cowboy would be found there or in the vicinity.

Only two persons were left in the crater camp—Peg-leg Hamil and Ina Brandon. Peg-leg because he was not a good traveler, and Ina because she was a woman, and, therefore, not considered a fighter.

Peg-leg was inoffensive enough throughout the remainder of the night and the following day; but, with the coming of another night, he began to show symptoms of restlessness.

A half-dozen times he stumped to the entrance of the camp and looked out. Once he climbed, by means of a ladder, to

the crater's rim, and peered across the hills. Frequently he visited the stables and inspected the few horses which remained.

Ina Brandon supposed he was becoming uneasy at the long absence of his comrades, but, later, she knew something of the plans that had been passing through his mind.

Finally, when darkness set in, his actions aroused her liveliest suspicions, and when he again went toward the stables, she stealthily shadowed him.

To her astonishment she saw him take saddle and bridle from their pegs and fit them to the best horse. She saw him slip revolvers into the saddle-holsters and attach a rope to the saddle horn.

When he had done this he came out, and she was forced to hurry to regain the house without exciting his distrust.

It was the house occupied as the home, while in the camp, of Brandon and Vennor. Peg-leg's abode was in another place, but he had been in this house frequently since the departure of the outlaws.

He came in again, now, and found her sitting in a chair and quietly reading a book by the lamp she had lighted.

He gave her a keen and inquiring look, and then stumped into the other room.

It was a room he had not heretofore entered, in her presence, and which she knew he had no right to enter. It was Vennor's room, and she more than half-suspected it contained money or treasure. She knew there were some queer-looking boxes in it, whose lids she had not been able to force without violence.

The intense curiosity that always dominated her has been shown. This curiosity was greatly excited by Peg-leg's singular actions, and when he disappeared within the room, she slipped to the door and tried to look in.

What she beheld was the black muzzle of a revolver thrust within an inch of her eyes.

She started back with a little cry of fright, which was followed by a curse from Peg-leg.

She would have run out of the room if he had not again pointed the revolver at her head and commanded her to stop.

"I've been keepin' my eyes on you, my lady," he declared. "You thought I wasn't, mebbee; but I know jist how you've been follerin' me around and a-watchin' of me."

She sank into a chair with a little gasp.

"That's right," with a grunt of satisfaction. "You're doin' about the sensiblest thing you've done this evenin'." I don't want to hurt you, and I ain't agoin' to hurt you, unless you drive me to it."

Her fears were relieved, and she tried to regain something of her composure.

"What are you up to?" she ventured to ask.

"Jist this," he said, snatching a coil of rope from a nail on the wall. "You're goin' to put out your lily-white hands and let me tie 'em, and no monkeyin' about it, either! That's what you are goin' to do, and that's what I'm up to!"

He had kept the revolver on guard, and pointed it directly at her head again as he approached her with the rope.

"Put 'em out!" was his harsh command.

She wanted to scream and run from the room, but that wicked-looking revolver kept her still, and she put out her hands.

He threw a coil of rope over them dexterously, and drew it tight. And then, having secured her in this manner, he wound the rope around and around the chair, enveloping in its folds her arms and body and limbs, until, as she afterwards declared, "she could hardly move her eyelids!"

It was a peculiar and unpleasant position, and the girl trembled violently with fear and dread.

"Now you'll set right there-like a stone image!" the bum assured. "You can't git yourself nor me into trouble, which ought to be a consolation, and if you wiggle around you'll turn the cheer over, and there you'll be on the floor, without bein' able to git up ag'in. So you'd better keep still!"

Having delivered himself of this, he coolly pocketed the revolver and turned back into the other room.

From this room he shortly afterward drew out two iron-bound wooden boxes; which done, he got a hatchet and forced the lids.

The boxes held gold coin and dust, and several buckskin bags filled with gems from the mine, representing, in all, fifteen or twenty thousand dollars.

The bum's eyes shone greedily.

"A pair of them sparklers would look mighty handsome in them pretty ears of yours!" he averred, holding two of the diamonds up to the light. "If I was yer lovyer, now, I'd be mighty tempted to give them to you. But I've got to look out for number one, you bet!"

"You'll be made to pay for this," she said, thinking it possible to frighten him.

"Will I?" and he glanced at her with the hatchet poised. "It's ketchin' before hangin', you know! Of course, you know what I intend to do?"

He put down the hatchet and the bags of gems, and began to search around the room. Presently he found some larger buckskin bags.

Into these he poured all the precious stones, the coin and the gold dust.

"I don't know as I'm any better or any worse than the rest of 'em," he said, as if in justification, as he paused before her, after pouring the treasure into the bags. "Most any of the boys would do the same if they had the chance. I've been figgerin' on this thing ever since I was left hyer."

"And, do you know, now, I b'lieve somethin's gone wrong with the gang? Anyway, it don't make any difference! I'm going to slide with the boodle, and they kin ketch me if they can, and hang me when they ketch me!"

"I couldn't git hold of that much swag even if I'd rob stages fer twenty years. And I should call myself an everlastin' idiot if I'd let a chance like this go by!"

He went out of the house carrying the treasure, and she heard him turn toward the stables.

"Are you going to leave me tied up this way?" she called out after him.

He did not reply, but, a few minutes later, she heard him lead the horse to the door of the cabin.

He opened the door and thrust his head in, and smiled, when he saw her sitting there, tied to the chair in that helpless fashion.

"If I was a picter-taker, now, I'd take yer photograph!" he called. "I'd git you to smile and look pleasant, and you could hand it down fer yer children to look at, and you could tell 'em how you had sich a time with a one-legged road-agent, and all that. It would be as interestin' as a novel!"

"But I'm wastin' my time hyer!"

"Are you going to leave me tied up this way?" she again demanded, the tears coming into her eyes.

"It does look like a shame!" he assented.

"But, hang it all, you'd go right straight and git one of the other hosses and ride off to tell the boys what I've done, and then these hills would git too hot to hold me."

"I figger that there'll be some of 'em back, bymeby! You ain't in any danger, unless the cabin should git afire! Well, so long!"

He drew the door shut and turned away, in spite of her supplications, and she heard him mount and clatter out of the valley.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE SPANGLED SPORT'S GRAND COUP.

The Spangled Sport lay in the shadow of a large rock, not far from the mouth of the Barrancas Mine.

He and Lariat Bill had reached the vicinity of the mine in due season, and had been diligently studying such portions of it as could be seen from the outside.

They had really learned nothing of material importance. There seemed to be no work—or very little—going on in or about the mine. They had only seen one man, and he was more of a guard, apparently, than anything else.

After scanning the mouth of the mine for some time, Hal crept from the shadow of the rock and made his way slowly and cautiously around the brow of the hill.

He was especially careful not to reveal his presence to the man on guard.

He was now going, though not aware of it, toward that point where Bessie Brandon had been held a prisoner.

Lariat Bill was on the other side of the mine, and it had been agreed between them that, if nothing was found out of importance to cause them to do otherwise, they were to meet on the farther side of the low mountain for consultation, previous to taking further action.

The sport had not seen Lariat Bill for an hour or more. He did not doubt, though, that his pard was abundantly able to take care of himself, and was not anxious on his account.

When he had progressed in this fashion for a half-mile or so, the sport caught sight of two queer figures advancing in his direction, but, not desiring to be seen by them, he sank softly to the earth beneath a growth of sage.

He stared out at them in much surprise, though he knew well enough what they were, if not who they were.

They were two men, clothed in the rough garb of the West. One was somewhat taller than the other, and both were so closely hooded, or masked, that not a glimpse of their features could be had.

The sport knew that they were members of the notorious hooded band with which he had come into such frequent contact.

He was particularly inclined to avoid their observation, and so hugged the ground closely, for he saw that they were coming almost directly toward him.

When the men came near he discovered that they were talking in low tones, and, when they had approached more closely, he started in surprise, for he recognized the voices as those of Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor, and they were talking about him and about Bessie!

"It's strange where they are!" he heard Brandon say.

Then they passed on, but he was pleased to see that, when they had gone a few yards farther, they separated.

The taller, who was Number Two, kept on in the direction they had been going, while Vennor turned at right angles and walked slowly down the hill.

The sudden hope that had come into the heart of the young Easterner became firm-rooted. It would be a great coup if he could capture these two men and, brave heart that he was, he resolved to make the attempt, desperate as it seemed.

He crawled from his cover and followed Vennor, who was moving slowly.

By taking advantage of a large rock and a cedar growth, the daring fellow was able to circle around Vennor and get into his pathway.

Having done this, he drew both of his revolvers, cocked them, and stood amidst the branches of a pinone until Vennor came within a few feet of him. Then he stepped out and covered the hooded scoundrel.

"Throw up your hands!" he commanded, in a low voice.

Vennor made a motion as if to get at his revolver.

"None of that!" sternly. "Throw up your hands or down you drop, you detestable villain. Up, I say!"

Only for an instant did the outlaw hesitate; then his hands went above his head.

Keeping him covered with one of the revolvers, Hal drew the weapons out of the scoundrel's belt and tossed them on the ground, which done, he forced him to walk on a few paces.

Both the sport and the cowboy had well supplied themselves with rope and cords—things considered so necessary, for a variety of reasons, in the border regions—from the store in the stable of the crater valley, and some of this cord the young man now drew out of his pockets.

But not for once, even though Vennor was disarmed, did he take the revolver from a bearing on Vennor's body.

Sternly commanding him to silence, Hal skillfully tied him, and then proceeded to bind him to a tree.

Bob Brandon had turned back, and as Hal's plan included the capture of Brandon, he gathered up Vennor's weapons and hastened to throw himself in the backward path of Brandon.

The latter, all unconscious of what had occurred, was giving no attention to his route, his object being to affect a junction with his friend.

He changed his course slightly, and the sport altered his location to suit this change.

This movement, seen by Brandon, was misunderstood and misinterpreted.

"It's all right!" he called out. "The way's clear in front of the mine, I think."

He fancied that the man before him, and now but a few rods away, was his disguised pal.

"Glad to know it!" declared the sport, stepping into plain view and covering him as he came up. "Up with your hands!"

Brandon was so astounded he could do nothing. He did not try to do anything! He did not even reach for a weapon, as Vennor had done.

The sport repeated the order, and Brandon's hands went up.

"I know you," said the young shadower. "You're Bob Brandon, and I've got a little settlement to make with you."

As he said it he deftly removed Brandon's weapons and slipped a knotted cord over his wrists.

Then, when it was too late, Number Two realized the nature of the trap he had fallen into, and his curses expressed his vicious nature.

"No use howling now! Better save your breath for something more profitable! I've got your pard, Vennor, back here—or the fellow that calls himself Vennor—and you'll walk back that way!"

There was no help for it, and Brandon obeyed the order, and soon after joined his pal beneath the tree.

Vennor was released from the tree, and, when their captor had possessed himself of their weapons, the sport drove the hooded road-agents on in front of him!

CHAPTER XLII.

CONCLUSION.

The fact that Bob Brandon was the father of the woman he loved did not deter the young Easterner. The father who was unfatherly enough to imprison his own child, as Brandon had imprisoned Bessie, deserved not to have his paternal relation recognized.

Besides, the sport knew that Brandon was a villain worthy of the condemnation of the law, and not even his regard for Bessie could have overcome his sense of duty.

Hence, he drove Brandon and the false Vennor on before him, around the hill, where Lariat Bill was encountered, who, of course, was immensely surprised by the remarkable turn of events.

The place which had served as Bessie's prison was discovered, and, in it, the prisoners were securely held, while Bill Larkins spread himself in the way of making inspections of the exterior and interior of the mine.

The guard was captured and forced to tell what he knew; but he was released when it seemed he was in no manner connected with the hooded ruffians and outlaws.

Those of the band who had come there with Brandon and Vennor were not to be found, and, it was learned afterward, from the lips of Brandon, that when the sport and the cowboy were not encountered, they had been sent to reinforce those who were sent to make the attack on the pueblo.

It appeared, however, that the junction of the two forces was not effected.

In the ancient city of Santa Fe, a week or so following the events just outlined, a

criminal trial was begun which drew the attention of every one in the territory. It was the trial of the members of the hooded band, who had been captured through the efforts of Halcyon Hal, the Spangled Sport Shadower, and Lariat Bill, the cowboy.

Bob Brandon and the false Talbott Vennor were naturally the center of all interest, as they were the recognized leaders of the desperate men who had so terrorized and disgraced the territory.

It was known then that the gambler who had assumed the name and the property of Talbott Vennor was none other than Steve Paley, the notorious gamester and confidence man of the Pacific Coast—a man who had given the police of San Francisco more trouble than any other criminal of the present generation.

A dozen men were on trial, while others were afterwards implicated and punished as accessories, for the hooded band, as was well known, had pals and allies innumerable of the ancient city.

It had been a powerful organization, but it was now shattered and undone. Many of the scoundrels were fugitives, and among them was Peg-leg Hamill.

Ina Brandon had been found and released by one of the party routed by the Pueblos, and though she afterward was seen once or twice in Santa Fe, she kept in hiding, and shortly afterwards disappeared completely, through fear of implication and prosecution.

As for Peg-leg, he was pursued to Silver City by an officer, a month later, and was there killed while resisting arrest. He had gotten rid of his stolen valuables by gaming and drink.

The trial of Brandon and Steve Paley and their confederates consumed a number of days' time; but, though every step was fought for them by good legal talent, the verdict of the jury was against them, and they were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in the territorial penitentiary, which lifts its forbidding walls on the very edge of the city they had so compromised.

Six months later, in a quiet church in New York city, there were united for life the young people whose experiences we have chronicled in this story of the Spangled Sport, the Santa Fe Shadower.

Bessie Brandon, though a trifle paler and with sadder eyes than when first seen by the reader, was really never handsomer than when she stood before the minister and placed her hand in that of the man she so devotedly loved, and promised to be his while life should last.

And such an alteration as there was in the appearance of the brave Halcyon Hal. The spangled Mexican costume was gone; the sport had vanished, and, seen in the full-dress garb of civilization, he looked the perfect gentleman and popular citizen that he was.

Lariat Bill Larkins was not content to wait so long to claim his bride, and he and Miss Susan Crabtree were married in Santa Fe, which they decided to make their home.

Of course, the Barrancas Mine came again into the possession of its rightful owner, the real Talbott Vennor, who lived many years thereafter, proud of his son, happy in the love of his children, and of his children's children, but whose memorable adventures in the Wild West were a sealed subject of discourse, for sweet Bessie's sake.

THE END.

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